

Foreword by Dr. William Monroe

Author of Power to Hurt

COLORING BOOK



An Eclectic Anthology of Fiction & Poetry by Multicultural Writers

Edited by boice-Terrel Allen

Author of Janet Hurst and The Daughters of a Mother



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DEC. 2003
For PAUL,
WITH ADMIRATION,
LOVE & THANKS
WAYNE

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Dedications

For my mother and best friend,
WANDA RUTH ALLEN,
who I both like and love.



In memory of my grandmother,
MARY ELIZABETH ALLEN,
whose spirit guides me on my journey.

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Foreword

Multiculturalism for the Rest of Us

Dr. William Monroe

We need a fresh understanding of “multicultural” writing, a definition that focuses on the motives of writers as opposed to the agendas of academics. Hence this definition: multicultural writing is made by persons who consciously work as outsiders but seek a general audience. Multicultural writers make work that is consciously other, consciously alternative to the dominant culture in which they find themselves. Often such writers are persons of color, but not always. Often such writers are gay, lesbian, or transgender, but not always. Often such writers are “ethnic,” but again, not always. A particular writer, according to this definition, might be doing multicultural work for a period and then turn to a different kind of writing. Not through proclamations or prior identifications but through poems and stories, writers, if they are so moved, should have the prerogative of making work that is multicultural. Why do we need writing that explores the meaning of being outside or on the edge, writing that figures forth marginality to an audience obsessed with being “in”?

Sometimes a question calls for a question in return: Who among us is wholly at home in our culture, indeed, in our own skin? We give the name postmodern to the cultural moment we are inhabiting, and by that we mean that, among other things, we are homeless—or rather, we move too conveniently from one cultural place to another, without being able to call any place home. This blithe traveling creates a longing, a nostalgia, (literally a “home-hurt”), and it is to stories and poems that we turn to help ground us, to locate ourselves in place and time...and thus to find a degree of comfort in our own skin.

Yet who among us wants to be trapped by the color of that skin, say, or by other ethnic or gender markers. Even at the risk of homelessness, some of us will seek freedom. Multiculturalism has sometimes been used as a mantra for those who would gladly trade freedom for the comforts of home. I remember a “monocultural” colleague expressing pity for a black student



who had read Plato, Homer, and the Bible but had yet to take an African-American literature course: “That poor boy doesn’t know who he is.” Perhaps he was, and is, discovering.

Stories and poems are our means of identification, of knowing who we are, where we fit, and where we don’t fit. The interesting thing about encountering and enacting unfamiliar stories and poems is that with every encounter we risk discovering something new. Sure, we can be cautious, reading only what will reinforce our prior identifications. This, too, is a definition of multiculturalism that has its adherents: Let’s congregate along ethnic lines and celebrate our distinctive experiences. But *monoculturalism* is probably a better name for celebrations of ethnic difference and strategies of separation.

My sense is that most of us, regardless of the ethnic, gender, or class markers that we bear, are familiar with the sense of being cut off, separated, isolated, and even persecuted by a more powerful clique or in-group. Alienation is a general if not indeed a universal experience, at least at this deracinated moment in human history. Let us exaggerate the point, but only slightly: multicultural writing speaks to everyone.

What we need, then, is a multiculturalism for the rest of us. We need to be learning each other’s stories, singing each other’s songs. If we would escape the stultifying comforts of home, we need to attend to the narratives and lyrics of others. How is such an appreciation possible? Only the most doctrinaire of separatists would argue that only Asians should read *The Woman Warrior* or only Latinas, *Woman Hollering Creek* or only Native Americans, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Kinston, Cisneros, and Momaday are casting a much wider net, and so too are the contributors to this volume. The fact is that readers, whether familiar or unfamiliar with the experiences depicted, have the capacity to understand and respond. Writing itself is a reaching out, a performative act that seeks an audience; and here is an earmark for a multiculturalism for the rest of us: it is writing that addresses an audience beyond the immediate community of the author. The reverse would also be true: a text so narrow in its appeal that it does not speak to readers of another ethnicity, for example, is a monocultural, not a multicultural, text. Multicultural writing has the capacity to affect and even transform culture, yes, but only because it welcomes us all—not in, but out, to see things fresh, in unaccustomed ways.

The reading and comprehension of literature requires a special kind of intimacy and communication. Reading an unfamiliar poem or story about unfamiliar emotions or characters with unfamiliar words and circumstances—this is hard work, and it means taking someone who is other into

our hearts and minds. Multicultural writing embodies a dream: that we can learn to hear each other again, or for the first time; that we can speak and listen to one another across the chasms and hurts of ethnic, class, and gender separations; that we can learn each other's stories. For it is not enough to communicate only with those who are most like us: WASP to WASP, African-American to African-American, Asian to Asian, Latina to Latina, middle class to middle class. As a nation, a society, and a people, we need not only different voices, but common stories.

What is *a* culture? Arguably there are as many cultures as there are conversations, as many conversations as there are relationships; that is to say, wherever two or three are gathered together, there culture is. These many cultures, these conversations, proceed serially and simultaneously, in cooperation and competition, overlapping and extending each another. As literate persons, we are fortunate to be engaged in a great, common conversation in which all are invited to attend and participate. *Coloring Book: An Eclectic Anthology of Fiction and Poetry by Multicultural Writers* is a collection that celebrates a gloriously diverse party of stories and poems. At any big party, there should be variety, lots of different folks. So it is here: some of the contributors are experienced and published writers; some are newcomers to the writing scene. This is their first public event, as it were. While not all are equally experienced, savvy, or skilled at their craft, all are welcome.

Because of the nature of this anthology, its open invitation to the entire spectrum of writers and readers, it deserves to find a general audience. In particular, I hope that it will be used by teachers to encourage their students toward formation, evaluation, and discovery of identity. Teachers in multicultural classrooms have a special opportunity to use multicultural writing in a crucial and timely way: by helping students, and readers generally, to discover fresh identities within the American plurality. This is indispensable cultural work: the construction of attentive, healthy, and potentially joyful human beings who are—it's a much-abused word but there is no ready substitute—free.

Regardless of our age, gender, ethnicity, prior experience, level of skill or education, whether we read and write prose or verse, we will continue to need a plentiful storehouse of the imagination, a reservoir of multicultural writing to draw on during the course of our lives. We are all part of the great, overlapping, sometimes cacophonous conversation. This collection implicitly assumes that everyone has a voice and that every voice should be heard, an assumption on which our great, ongoing, democratic experiment is founded. Let's hope, against long odds, it works.



Introduction

boice-Terrel Allen

I.

When I began writing my second novel (and first published book), *The Daughters of Mother*, I chose to make the main characters white. Why? My first unpublished novel, based on my grandmother's early life in North Carolina, was the story of a black woman. I simply decided to take turns. Nothing political about this choice. No hidden agenda. Artistic freedom, you could call it. Also, I knew that this particular book wasn't about race, so it wouldn't have made a difference if they were tartan-colored. I wasn't writing a race book.

So fast forward to when my book is birthed and ready for the world to see. After people would read the book, many responded to the infamous page 10, where the ethnicity of the twin girls is revealed. *I wasn't expecting that*, some said. Others asked, *Why did you make them white? Why didn't you make them black?* Or even, *I had to change my thought process when I found out what race they were*. Mind you, these remarks came from readers of varying backgrounds. To be quite honest, I hadn't taken into consideration that Talulah and Cora's racial make-up would be considered. Perhaps this was naïveté on my part. Or just blindness. I prefer the former; it's slightly more flattering. Anyway, my response was often, *Why does it matter?*

Oh, it doesn't. I just thought...

Since I'm black, my God, why in the world would I write about two white girls. Who did I think I was? A writer with talent? That's what I like to think when I'm hunched over a lined notebook. But I knew these "concerns" weren't questioning my talent. But it made me wonder, if it's not about talent (or skill), is it about the lack of empathy we possess?

For the sake of an argument, let's say I am naïve. Isn't this a matter of not being able to imagine how the Other lives? Men don't understand women. Straights don't understand gays. The haves don't understand the have-nots and the list persists. And certainly blacks and whites don't understand each other. Yet I refuse to submit to the axiom of writing what you know. It's a notion that I don't subscribe to as a writer, as an artist, as a creative thinker. However, as an African-American male in America, I have personally experienced that everyone doesn't want to share the pleasure of my company.

Even though on most days it is quite pleasurable. But I write fiction, so where does this leave me when creating prose? I want the choice to write freely about whomever or whatever I want. I want to step into other folks' shoes. I want the world on my palette. The world I live in, the world I envision.

Despite the many misunderstandings and wrong assumptions that continue in the world by all of us (and it has been said that we're all a "little" racist sometimes), I believe art is the one place where we get to work all of this out. Where our -isms and phobias can be transcended and our differences celebrated. I hardly think I'm vacationing in Utopia when I say that art can allow us to see the commonality between ourselves. Does heartbreak feel differently if you're Asian, as opposed to Jewish? I'm neither, but would certainly testify that it's no ride on a merry-go-round when you're black.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that the title character of my second novel, *Janet Hurst*, is black and married to a white man. Again, and I expected it this time, I was faced with the Why? question. I must admit, after my previous race experience, I knew this would get a rise out of people. (However, this book was written prior to the publication of *The Daughters of a Mother*.) And I find that exciting. I believe art should be provocative. It should question you as you question it.

Since we happen to be discussing race, another situation occurred upon my first book's release (and still persists). I personally discovered that I wasn't an author; I was a Black Author. Yet my white writing brethren are never subjected to the White Author tag. Perhaps, as Gloria Steinem said, only white men require no adjectives. In the glorious event of seeing my novel on bookstore shelves for the first time, I noticed that often booksellers would file *The Daughters of a Mother* in their "African-American" section. Nothing wrong with this, but as an artist, I felt like some sort of literary apartheid had taken place. Without my consent, of course. My books would just magically appear there. I assumed this was based on my being African-American; which is ironic since it certainly wasn't based on the race of the twin sisters. The moment a bookseller saw my author picture looming on the back cover, I became the Black Author. A classification I share with the Latino Author and the Woman Author and so on. Fortunately, I'm no shrinking violet and would request to have my books placed in the general fiction section also. But I'm a bit confused about this general section. If you're a white author (intentional lowercase), you automatically go there. Unless you can be sub-categorized i.e. gay. But this section will also hold the Toni Morrisons or the Junot Diazs. There doesn't seem to be a firm rule about who goes there. But if you ask nicely, I'm sure you too could be generally categorized.



This automatic placement of my books brought up several ways to rise my ire. What about the book lover who doesn't browse the "African-American" section of their bookstore, but is not opposed to reading such literature? Or the reader who doesn't even know said section exists? These readers, perhaps, have no idea I even exist. Who can even account for the loss of potential book sales due to the placement of my books? And as an artist, I have never written for a particular audience. I've always believed my fiction was universal, in the sense that whatever the race of the characters the reader could potentially see themselves in their place. These "book islands" of minority writers imply otherwise. To paraphrase Toni Morrison, race is the least important trait we can know about a character. So my question now, besides the anthology section, *where* will this book be placed?

II.

The initial vision of this anthology was to provide, under one cover, a collection of fiction and poetry by emerging multicultural writers. Although the call-for-submissions never stated the specifics of what defines an emerging writer, I expected to receive work from writers who had either never been published before or had very little of their writing previously released. Obviously, judging from the forthcoming submissions, I was in the minority (no pun intended) on the true definition of emerging. I received fiction and poetry from writers who'd been published in dozens of the best literary journals, or who had several books sitting in bookstores. How could I possibly reject excellent work from someone because they had too much experience? But in addition to the well-published, I also received the virgins, many of whom are making their literary debut in this anthology.

So I knew now that this wouldn't be a multicultural anthology of emerging writers; it would be something different. Something broader. More expressive. In the call-for-submissions, I specified that I was seeking all styles of writing. And I received them. And I loved it. The submissions were becoming a reflection of my own personal taste. I've never limited my reading material to one category and have always been open to the worlds of those who don't look like me, live like me or even love like me. What fresh pleasure to discover that I had such a diverse choice of literature at my fingertips, along with the privilege and opportunity to share it with the world. Thus, the proposed anthology mutated into this whole other creature. The book you now hold in your hands, *Coloring Book: An Eclectic Anthology of Fiction and Poetry by Multicultural Writers*, is the distillation of over 400 submissions.

A word about the title. In my mad search for a word or a phrase that somehow summarized what this book represented or hoped to achieve, the universe dropped into my lap *Coloring Book*. A title influenced by the multicultural *Beacon Best* series, whose subtitle includes “women and men of all colors.” The intention of the title is to reflect the myriads of backgrounds represented within the book, but I was also interested by the concept of the traditional coloring book as we know it. As kids, armed with a box of crayons and faced with pages of human beings made up of lines, the possibilities to fill in the spaces were limitless. As kids, we didn’t box ourselves in with the color we were “supposed” to use. How many of us have invented green people? In our youth, we let our muse lead us where it wanted. It’s this notion of inspiration, not obligation, that this anthology attempts to reveal, while at the same time, the title quite possibly draws attention to race, because race (along with anything else that makes us different from each other) is important and we should never forget that it is. Or, the Other’s responsibility to our particular culture and our art is an endless tug of war.

Writers. With our words we convey who we are, both consciously and unconsciously. And who we are informs every word, every phrase, every idea that trickles from our pen. These eighty-four writers (plus myself) I’ve had the pleasure of bringing together under a literary multicultural umbrella understand that *they* decide what to write. Not because of anyone else’s expectations. They understand that being _____ does not mean you have to write exclusively of your particular world. As if you are its sole representative. They share a common knowledge as artists of the written word: you have the inclination, the talent, the gift to write about whatever you want, whenever you want.

As for the “eclectic” of the title, *Webster’s* defines it as “selecting what appears to be best in various doctrines, methods, or styles.” Collectively, these shining works of prose and poetry find their place under this definition.

III.

As an editor, it is my ultimate wish that you, the reader, will give every piece the undivided attention it deserves. If given the chance, some pieces will take you places you thought you’d never want to explore, while others will comfort you with a shared familiarity. Whether you throw this book at the wall or earmark your favorite passages to read to loved ones, *Coloring Book* walks no line.

boice-Terrel Allen
November 2003

Jonathan Alexander

Future Fag, 1

In the future, we will not be noticed.
Our lives, unobserved, of little to no consequence.
Finally released from the constraints
Of suspicion, confession, and flesh.

Hands that had remembered will forget,
Tongues that slept will sleep more peacefully still.
And the body will see the sun for the first time,
Not know what it is, blink, and be gone.

For with a body, hands, and a tongue, they know who you are.
But without? No need to confess.

Then we will eat the stars, one by one.
Invisible. And night will come, and our love
Unobserved will be of little to no consequence
At last.

boice-Terrel Allen

The Pathetic Biographer

My father was murdered the night before Christmas. His body swaddled in lace, hidden underneath his basement steps, with only the top of his head exposed.

I found him, cold and resistant to movement. His striking face drawn and unreflective through a thin film of blood. An indentation the size of a tangerine on his forehead.

He'd seen his death.

I unwrapped him. The difficult task of unrolling him in the dusty crawlspace. The blood permeated the layers of lace, creating horrific patterns.

Vainly hopeful, I placed my ear against his heart for a sound or a movement. My actions confirmed what my heart had already known.

Throughout the discovery, I was plaintive, even though only moments before I had tore through his house searching for him. The act of conclusion, of seeing a goal to its fruition. He was expecting me from college break, said he'd be home and now he was dead.

The front door was unlocked, which was odd for my father. He was a man of distrust. The man who noted the speedometer of his car before he allowed me to use it as a teenager. The same man who listened in on my phone calls and referred back to any learned information when my guard was down. A distrustful man. Yet, a man with secrets. And a man with secrets would never leave the front door of his house unlocked, especially during the holidays. And holidays can forever be scarred by exposed secrets.

I closed the door behind me, honoring my father by locking it. I called his name in my usual speaking manner. No response. Maybe he was upstairs in the bathroom or taking one of his multiple showers of the day. His alternative to poisoning his body with deodorants of any sort. I made my way from the foyer to the living room, through the dining room to the kitchen. Each area celebrating Christmas with excess. My father, who was extensively restrained in almost every other compartment of his life, lost all sense of taste with his decorating style. It was my mother, God rest her soul, who endlessly reined him in. But after her death, it was as if he was celebrating somehow. The first Christmas after she passed away, I told him

I was appalled by his extravagant behavior. What I thought was his utter lack of respect. He simply dismissed my collegiate affectations, his words, with a roll of his eyes.

I continued to call out to my father, leaving enough space in between for him to respond. I climbed up the flight of stairs to the second floor, still receiving no answer. Not one to usually worry, my heart quickened without an excuse. It wasn't like there was a given cause to worry. When the cab dropped me off, nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Besides, I was not that kind of worrier. I needed reasons, evidence to worry. My fears were never based on paranoia or expectations. Therefore, I wish I had some kind of excuse for my escalating internal alarm, other than an unlocked door.

I checked every room upstairs. The master bedroom. The guest room. Even the bathroom. I concluded he had to be in the basement, indulging in his most recent of pastimes, lace making. This replaced tennis, which replaced skeet shooting, but became almost as important, at least to my collegiate observations, as weightlifting. My father had clung to weightlifting since his teenage years, when he tired of being the school nerd, he once told me. At 57, my father was the type of man who people always remarked how good he looked for his age. He made no bones about my avoiding the gym and any other physical exertion. You look like shit, he'd tell me without a hint of levity. And I'd tease him about his lace hobby and he'd give me that familiar hard gaze that carefully and silently explained: some things are never fodder for laughs.

I expected to find my father hovering over his worktable, surrounded by needles and reams of lace at his feet. Entranced by some complicated stitch he'd mastered. I began running towards the basement reminded of a past franticness when I was little and came home from school and no one was there. Doing as I had done on this Christmas Eve, searching and searching to no avail. Only to have both of my parents enter from the back door, mildly laughing and each holding a dry cocktail glass in their hand. They were enjoying the good weather in the backyard and needed a refill. I was furious that they had scared me and that their careless mood contrasted with my fear. It was like they didn't even care. I just knew my father would be the same when I discovered him. He'd be humming some aria and look up from his work at hand and say, What the hell are you doing yelling all over my house? He'd heard me the whole time. Amused.

The lights were on in the basement. Their glow creating diamonds at the top of the stairs. I walked down the steps without making a sound, hoping to gain some small revenge against my father's tragic sense of

humor. I would surprise him. At the landing I could survey the entirety of the room and my father was not there. Maybe I had overlooked a note, I thought. When people say, this isn't like him, in reference to someone's out-of-character behavior, they never take into consideration that people change, people get fed up, people just don't care anymore. But I could honestly say, this was not like my father. If he had left a note of some sort, it would have been on the kitchen table in plain view or waiting on the floor as soon as I opened the front door. And again, my father would have never left the door unlocked.

I decided to once more check the house, much more carefully this time. But any further inspection proved unnecessary. As I turned to go back up the stairs, I saw a length of lace rolled up the way carpet would be. Peculiar, I thought. My father would never be so careless. Then I noticed deep red peppering only one end of the lace. White lace with irregular deep red patterns? Curiosity forced me to take a closer look.

I'd found my father.

Frantic as I felt, I entered into a new mode. I became calm. Too distracted to cry. In some sort of shock, maybe. My father laid beneath my kneeling body.

After I unwrapped him, I called 911 from the phone on the wall. When a woman answered, I only said, Somebody killed my father. I don't remember what else she asked or what else I might have said. I had my father propped up in my hands when the sound of the sirens neared. I gently placed him on the floor, amazed at how heavy his body was. He was literally dead weight. I rushed upstairs to answer the door.



This year's Christmas was supposed to be hopeful. One of resolution and determination. My first in two years following my mother's passing. She was my only reason for visiting. Then suddenly, I had none. I say suddenly because there was no lingering illness; she was ripped from my life when a drunk driver careened onto a sidewalk where she took her morning walk before work. My father and I were told by the police she most likely didn't feel anything. I've always prayed for that to be true. She was wearing her Walkman, probably set too loud to that atrocious smooth jazz station I teased her about. Why don't you listen to real jazz? I'd joke. Her hands were surely swinging back and forth at her side while she briskly walked through the neighborhood.

With nary a relationship or an understanding of my father, it seemed obvious that I would choose to live on-campus at the state college. He hadn't asked where I would live anyway. My father never asked questions

he already knew the answer to. All we would have done was politely argue. That back and forth verbal ping-pong between two people who really don't care what the other person has to say. Therefore, I was utterly taken aback when he had asked me to come home for Christmas this year. I was lying on the floor of my dorm, a pile of dirty clothes under my head for a pillow. I thought, but didn't say, What the hell for? Then he said he wanted me to meet someone. Someone special, he added. This conversation was more than I could bear. I clumsily excused myself to a non-existent class. My father knew. This was November and several more just-thinking-of-you calls followed.

I endured endless conversations as this sterile man, my father, gushed over "someone special." The same man who couldn't even write he loved me in a card. Just Dad, he'd sign. This same man was now in love. Or something that looked like it, I hoped. And just like that it hit me. I always questioned if he ever loved my mother the way you should love someone you decide to marry. And if he didn't, my father wasn't falling in love again; he was falling in love. And for some reason, this scared me.

You two will get along, he said often. You have a lot in common.

My wordlessness must not have been indicative of my disapproval. He'd continue with a childlike abandon I'd never witnessed or could imagine from him. Who was this man calling me? Where was the guarded son-of-a-bitch that raised me? Now he was open and receptive. Especially our last conversation before my visit. He'd given me the flight schedule he'd made without my knowledge. He pleaded with me to come home. To make things right? He asked shyly. There was a vulnerability in his voice, along with sincerity, that made me unable to say, I have work to catch up on or I can't this year. My usual explanations. It didn't feel right to use them. You can meet this new person in my life, he finally offered. My father always spoke like men with secrets do. Vague. Bare. Efficient. Leaving you to inquire (or not), to ask questions (or not) they clearly didn't want answered on your terms.

I hung up the phone with a mild expectation of clarification. Something I've never received from my father. Something that began and ended and came back to when I was much younger. A small boy. Something that was never discussed with me.

It must have been football season because I had to wear gloves and a hat, in addition to my coat to go outside. My mother was becoming increasingly infuriated with me for coming in and out of the house to use the bathroom. I almost wish you would use a tree like all the other boys, she said. I know that's what they do instead of bothering their mothers and letting

the good heat out. I'd say I was sorry each time and when I was eventually diagnosed with a too-small bladder, I never let her forget it.

My father was on the couch watching a game with his best friend at the time, Mr. Gurney. Amazingly, my father didn't seem to mind how many times I traipsed in and out of the house, even though I had to pass through the living room where they were. It probably had to do with their emotional viewing of sports. A pleasure that even today surpasses all reason for me.

The streetlights came on, which meant that it was time for me to come in for the day. Nothing more than running around and chasing each other in the snow was probably interrupted. I entered the house and as I closed the screen door, I didn't hear my dad and Mr. Gurney screaming foul or touchdown or anything at all. Only of the sound of the TV blared. Mom was upstairs. I removed my sneakers for the umpteenth time that day, so I wouldn't track up the rest of the house. Basically, the only personal annoyance I had with my constant peeing. I hated having to remove and then put my sneakers back on. But unlike the other boys, I couldn't use a tree or sneak behind some bushes to take care of my business. I didn't know at the time it was called pee-shyness.

In nothing but damp, cold socks on my feet, I walked into the living room and saw Mr. Gurney giving my father a massage. My father was still seated on the couch and Mr. Gurney was standing behind him, silent, his hands kneading my father's shoulders. As for my father, his head lazily rested back into Mr. Gurney's crotch. I completely recall the look of contentment on my father's face.

I stood there watching. I couldn't run away. They sensed my presence because they jumped away from each other the way people do when they've done something they hope no one has seen. But what I remember most is the look they gave me. Like I'd done something wrong. What's so wrong about a massage? Neither one of them said a word to me. Mr. Gurney sat back down on the couch. They both faced the screen and I ran from the doorway. Still feeling like I'd done something bad. For the remainder of my life, I couldn't escape the look they both gave me that day.



I stood in that same living room waiting for the ambulance and the police to arrive and allowed the memory of that look to chill me. They came almost at the same time. I knew the neighbors would be gathering soon. I led everyone to the basement and eventually lost all semblance of composure as my father's studio was turned into a crime scene. One of the paramedics made me sit down as gushes of nausea poured from within me past my lips. It was the outlining of his body that did it. To be so close. It

was like the outline was my father's ghost, not quite ready to release him. A policeman's voice called out for somebody to get me the hell out of there. I clung like a marionette on the arm of someone.

The investigation began with me. I was asked questions that I could answer and more often, others that I could only guess. I was of no help; I knew so little of my father's life. He knew so little of mine. Often it seemed they were asking me to reveal the life story of a stranger I sat next to on the plane. When I was asked, Do you have any idea who'd want to do this to your father? I said no without hesitation. My reply was certainly based on ignorance. Are you sure? I was asked again and repeated my answer. Anyone he might have mentioned casually to you? the detective asked. I wasn't so sure then. The detective knew I wasn't sure. He repeated himself. I spoke gingerly, feeling like I was about to betray my father and his life of secrecy. My father always said, family matters remain in the family. Even after his murder, did this still hold true?

I explained that he had a friend he spoke favorably of more recently. I didn't have a name. I realized, I didn't even have a gender. My father never specified. Which should have rang an alarm to me. This was the visit when I would know. I was supposed to meet them for the first time, I explained. I sounded like the son of a secretive man.

I was lodged between two moods. Grief and exasperation. I just wanted to be alone. No more questions. I couldn't answer the way I was expected. I probably annoyed the detective as much as I annoyed myself. I vaguely apologized that I was too upset to continue. I was told I would be contacted again. But then the detective added, Are you sure you can't tell me anything about your father's friend? I could only nod. Would it have helped their investigation if I had shared with them how excited my father was over this friend? Or how I reminded my father of this friend or more accurately, the other way around. I don't know if my hesitation to speak was evident, but in some odd way I expected this trifling bit of information to help. But really, how could it?

After everyone left, I walked through the house again. I'm not sure why. As if I was hoping, in vain, to find my father. But, of course, I did not. All that greeted me was the emptiness. The same emptiness that was there when I had first arrived, unaware that my father was dead underneath the basement steps. The same emptiness that existed as its own entity and threatened to consume me. I had to sit down. After walking upstairs, I returned downstairs to *that* couch. Where ages ago I witnessed my father's head back, eyes closed, taken away by another man's calloused hands rubbing his shoulders. The span of years connected with the detective's



question that I was incapable of answering, Are you sure you can't tell me anything about your father's friend?

What could I say? I was an inept authority on my father. I only knew shades of what he allowed me to see. To view. To understand. Yes, I knew his presence. His walls. Often a victim of them. But I knew little of his personal life. His private life, I suppose. I was the pathetic biographer. Left with little more or little less information found in one of those instant books on the latest teen heartthrob. I could supply his statistics. His height, weight, hair color, etc. His birth date, and now, the date of his death versus a surplus of gaps and voids surrounding that event in front of the Sunday afternoon football game.

Most biographers design their story to illustrate their subject's life with a thread pulled from their earliest beginnings of childhood adventures, traveling forward through the headiness of first successes, stopping, of course, to include a failure or two, both the personal and career-related ones and so on, with the direct intention of proving that perhaps, if we're fortunate, like said subject, we change as we grow and our lives will possibly serve as a cautionary tale to the reader. Enlightenment? These connected events of a life lived. Of my father's life, which returned me to the chorus in my head, Are you sure you can't tell me anything about your father's friend?

Alone on the couch, I somehow expected enlightenment to be more of a revelation. It wasn't, it was inconsequential, considering my father had been murdered by, most likely, his male lover.



It had probably been a complicated day. The way days leading up to a holiday can be, despite the best intentions. Not complicated in the way that something is challenging or a difficult life lesson is, but in the sense that there's never enough time for all the things you need to do.

My father and his friend spent the day together. Those final, tedious hours of shopping on Christmas Eve at the local mall. Herded with the others who swore to Christ on the cross and his angels, back when there were still leaves on the trees, that this year they wouldn't wait until the last minute to take care of their gift shopping.

You want to get something from the food court? he'd ask my father. I'm really hungry.

_____, I have so much food at home already. You can wait a little longer, can't you? I really don't have much more shopping to do.

Then my father would look at his perfunctory list, rattling off each and every item and chore in order of importance. Only my father in love would

find himself shopping the night before Christmas. But isn't that what love can do? Take you out of yourself, away from yourself and then back again, all for someone else. Then, his friend, his lover, might affectionately rub my father's shoulder to punctuate his easy demand. Was it really a question that he wouldn't eat? My father would tense his entire broad, muscled body. Telling himself no one saw one man touching another man *that way* in public. Telling himself that he shouldn't be so closeted, that's what his friend, his lover, repeatedly told him. But he could never shake his inhibitions. Besides, my father was never an affectionate man in the first place.

My father would find himself sitting at table in the food court. Surrounded by his many shopping bags. Constantly checking his watch while _____ waited in any one of the crowded lines. How people can pollute their bodies with junk is beyond reasoning, my father would mull over in his head. An impatient man. He'd want to finish shopping. He'd want to leave. Now. But he loved _____. And aren't you supposed to do things you don't want to do for those you love? At least sometimes.

_____ would return with a tray. Not a take-out bag. By now, he knows of my father's impatience, well. You're not going to let me eat alone, are you? he'd ask. And why would I want to watch you eat junk? my father thinks. My father wants to chastise him, but decides against it since it would create more tension. And besides, _____ would not stop eating anyway. My father knows this. He'd really have to rush now. Rush to complete the remainder of his shopping. Rush through the holiday traffic. Rushing until he was home. Preparing those last minute decorating touches. Perhaps, the tightly woven lace cover on the dining room table. That would need to be pressed with the iron. The intricate placemats on the kitchen table would also need to be free of creases. All before my arrival.

My father, the master of grudges, would perform the cooking or the ironing under a smoke of resentment. Blaming _____. Blaming himself. Then _____ would try to calm him with seduction. The cure for what ails you. Maybe on this very couch. The couch where I saw my father and our neighbor. Maybe in the same position. My father sitting on the couch. This time fuming. Pouting. _____ behind him. A massage? Kisses on the nape? My father would brush his hands away. Then lurch forward to avoid them altogether. As if flames curled out from _____'s fingertips. More futile attempts until my father would stand up and order him to leave. Why do you act so immature? my father would ask. Knowing the answer already, as he touched the creases on his face. Even though I look good for my age, he'd think. That's what everyone tells me.



Hurt. Rejected. _____ grabs his coat. Making emphasized gestures as he drags his arms through the sleeves. Maybe he's only infuriated because he didn't get what he wanted. For all the hastiness used to put on his coat, his walk to the door is lingering. Maybe he's waiting for my father to ask him to stay. To apologize for being so...himself. Again with the make-up game.

Then they'd make love.

But this time is different. How? My father knows I'm coming. The beginning of our new beginning. Maybe, he had decided, we'd talk about that moment on the couch, too many years ago. He'd know the moment I met _____, I'd want answers. Explanations.

But this time is different. The game of _____ and my father's. The kind of game where you don't know the rules, the outcome, the winner or the loser.

_____ reconsiders and walks back to my father. He reaches out. My father slaps him. The way he would slap my mother. Stunned, _____ backs away. Then seethes. Unlike my mother, he hits my father back. As good as he got. Then they fight. An old-fashioned fist fight to rival any from a black and white Western. They struggle against each other. A new component of the game neither one of them has anticipated. My tall, broad-back father who looks good for his age, channels his entire life, his suppression, my mother, me, onto _____. _____ is no match against a lifetime of rage. He has no choice but to pick up something. Anything. Something nearby. The nearest Thing that will make my father stop pummeling him. That's all. To just make him stop. He picks up a candleholder? Or a vase? Or a Thing that's just plain heavy? It doesn't matter.

He'd seen his fate.

_____ 's crying. Shaking. My father falls to the floor. He's not moving. _____ checks my father's pulse, like he's seen in the movies. Fingers to the temple. Ear to the chest. Nothing. He understands, now, how easy it is to find yourself caught in a situation beyond your grasp. He understands he wants to finish college. English Lit, my father mentioned. The same as mine. He wants to write a novel. But who doesn't? He wants to do everything. He wants to rule the world. He believes he can. For God's sake, we're both in our early twenties. Of course we can rule the world. But this changes everything: my father on the floor. Not moving. Not breathing. The blood pouring from the gash. From his head. Matting his hair. If I search, will I see smeared pinkness where a desperate try was made to remove the staining blood from the floor? Does he bring the lace to my father or my father to the lace? Lace first. Less mess. Then he drags him or

carries him over his shoulder. Down to the basement. My father is dead or dying. But _____ is still desperate and he believes nothing can be undone.

He places my father's body under the staircase where he probably stands over him before leaving. Praying, maybe. He is convinced that he wants to rule the world. He has to leave. Leave the house before I arrive. Leave before we ever meet.



We will never meet. _____ and I. We will never connect. At least not the way my father wanted. And my father and I found no resolution. Only the expectation or idea of resolution.

My father's murderer was never captured. Maybe it was _____. Maybe it wasn't. In some difficult, indirect way though, he gave my father something I never could. And in some haunting way, he would bring my father and I together.

Shane Allison

When I Move Out of My Parents' House

I.

When I move out of my parents' house
I'm gonna throw the biggest party the south has ever seen.
I'll invite all the men I've had sex with.
The ones I've had crushes on
When writing poems was the only thing to get
Me through the shock of seeing girlfriends and wives
Hanging off their shoulders like dirty washcloths.
Don't get me wrong, I love my folks, but they drive me crazy.
I'm in a straight jacket of hell when I wake up to the sounds of
Running vacuums and the roar of a lawn mower
Outside my bedroom window that lets in more light than heaven.
My little niece is a fire alarm
When she doesn't get what she wants: Cookies, *The Cartoon Network*.
I'm gonna paint my nails and wear
Lipstick without worrying about Mama asking,
Is that nail polish you wearin'?

II.

When I move out of my parents' house,
I'm taking the clothes and books I bought
With my own money. These sheetrock walls are old
And easily give way to a spoon as I chisel my way
Out of this place of family dysfunction, this Alcatraz
Of spotted carpet, roaches as big as rats, toilets on the Fritz
And showers that only drizzle cold water.
I'm gonna let the mildewed door hit me in the ass on the way
out.
There won't be any emotional goodbyes,
Hugs or kisses on this cheek, but duffle bags stuffed with shirts
And faded out, cut up jeans.
No note thanking them for whipping my ass when I wouldn't
participate

In gym, for listening in on my late night phone
Conversations to Jeff about dicks and big tits.
Released to them after my being busted for sticking my cock
Beneath bathroom stalls of malls.
Picked me up after weekly counseling sessions of
Court stipulated, heterosexual
Brainwashing. Walked out of Dr. Dennard's office
In a cold sweat, shivering in the back seat of the Monte Carlo
like a car-wounded dog
I'll say goodbye with the howl of my car engine.
Say so long to living room fights,
Daddy peeved and spitting at basketball games.
I leave unto them the sudden screech
Of my tires rolling off the cracked driveway.
Eat my dirt road dust.
When I make my way in this life,
Able to buy my own taco supremes,
My own damn three piece chicken boxes,
I'll crash through the doors like a runaway city bus, stand
In the kitchen where you're feasting on turkey wings,
Rice and corn and say...I MADE IT!
Left this college town of confederate flags, this house of hell,
For big city, big break chances.
A night life of drag queens,
Go-go boys in silk g-strings.
I'll do as I please, come home piss drunk
After meat packing Sundays at Stonewall.
I'll put my arm around every man I meet.
I'll be more outgoing,
Take a cooking class,
Join a gym,
Join a sex club,
Feed pigeons in Washington Square Park,
Piss on my own toilet,
Change my own tire,
Weed my own front lawn,
Have dinner parties and cookouts,
Buy a dog, pick flowers,
Hang out as long as I please and not worry about being as
Quiet as a burglar in my own house out of fear of waking you up.

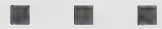


There will be no one to disturb.
I will watch gay situation dramas with gay characters, with gay themes
And not concern myself with flipping the channel every time you walk by
With your nightly glass of Check cola, eyes squinting to the lights of in-table lamps,
Asking, *what is this you watchin', Shane?* She knows.
Mothers always know the true identities of their sons.
I'll listen to the music I want to listen to without you asking,
You like that white people's music? I'll spin pancake cd's till
Till my feet bleed from dancing.
No more *turn that radio down, boy!*
Forget having my best interests at heart.
I'll wear what I want 'cuz in New York, no one gives a damn.
I will walk through my apartment naked.
Sing as loud as I want 'cuz it's my house
And in my house, I'm better than Whitney Houston.
I'm taking over the controls of my life.
You can't tell me what to do.
I'm gonna eat Mexican food,
Order Chinese takeout
And fuck the pizza delivery boy.
I'll cut my own steak,
Wash my own clothes.
I'm gonna sleep on my own naked mattress
Without putting a sheet on my bed.
I won't cook everything fried or baked in skillet and ovens.
I'd rather eat raw fish eggs than one more stewed tomato.
There will be no onions in my version of Texas Hash.
Neck bones don't have enough meat on 'em.
There will be no chittlins cookin' in my house,
No bags of pork skins in my cabinets. I like double cheeseburgers
And fast food French fries.
I'll scrub my own pots and pans,
Buy my own plates and plastic glasses.
Paint my own picture
And hang it in front of the walk-in closet that I built.
I'll wear train-length night gowns

like you used to wear that hung elegantly
Off your shoulders.
I'll buy my own lipsticks and eye shadows.
A gold-plated spider pendant.
Come up with my own recipe for Chicken and Pearlo rice.

III.

Remember when we went to see *Streets of Fire* at the Varsity?
I was ten when we saw *The Terminator*.
Arnold Schwarzenegger gave me nightmares.
I wanted to get in bed with you and Daddy,
Snuggle between your parental bodies for safety.
We went to J. Byron's. It always had that "new clothes" smell.
While you were off looking at blouses on the clearance rack,
I was peeking under the dresses of mannequins
That didn't have vaginas or nipples on their tits.
I was my mama's boy.
But I have to be my own man,
Make my own way.
I want to be a rich and famous asshole.
I'm a selfish, self-centered bastard.
A bowl of emotional oatmeal.
I'll buy groceries.
Stay up late in flannel pajamas while curled up on my newly-
owned used sofa
Eating butter pecan ice cream by the gallon.
I'm too big to be spanked.
I won't be whipped with a leather belt.
Grounding me is futile.
I won't go to bed when my favorite TV show is on
Because you say I have school in the morning.
Instead of stuffing *Playguy* and *Black Inches* magazine
like a Thanksgiving turkey, in drawers, under tube socks and
underwear,
I'm gonna spread them out on the coffee table
In plain sight between the bowl of peppermints,
The raspberry-scented candlesticks.
I'm gonna leave bread crumbs on my own countertop.
Gonna cook fried egg sandwiches in the middle of the night.



I make chili like I make love.
At my house, all food is served spicy.
There's no soda sitting in my fridge.
I drink Vodka tonics like chocolate milk.
I won't be babied.
My self-esteem will not be severed like a slashed throat.
I'm moving out, damn it!
Gonna catch the next Greyhound to Greenwich Village,
Gonna blanket myself in rainbow flags,
Gonna speak with a lisp,
Gonna wrap the world around me like a feather boa,
Gonna swish down Christopher Street
And become the true queen I was always meant to be.

Tracy Chiles Alston

Roberta from 3B

Go ahead and make yourself comfortable, but before I answer your question, let me tell you a little story first. Let's see. It was around 11:40 one night when I heard a knock at the door. I remember the time because Jay Leno was right in the middle of his opening jokes. Naturally, I said to myself, "Who in the world is that knocking on my door at this time of night?" I got out of my warm bed and grabbed my old scraggly pink terry cloth robe and put it on. I've been hinting to my daughter-in-law that I need a new robe, but she can't catch a clue for anything—to be a big-time lawyer and all. Anyway, I looked through the peephole and lo and behold it was Roberta from 3B. All I could think was, *What in the hell does she want?*

Roberta was my next-door neighbor at the old apartment complex where I used to live before my married son, you know the one that graduated from Georgetown University, bought me this here lovely townhouse. He's a doctor, you know. Anyway, Roberta was a skinny, sunny-brown-skinned woman, who always wore her thick, pretty hair piled high on her head with a black velvet scrunchie. She was probably thirtysomething but dressed more like she was twentysomething, always wearing tight clothes that showed too much skin. She actually reminded me a little of Lola Falana in the face, an actress and singer from back in my day.

I used to run into Roberta at the bus stop all the time. Of course, now I drive that nice light blue Saturn parked in my garage, a gift from my single son, you know the accountant that graduated from Columbia University. Anyway, Roberta and I never took the same bus—just waited on the same bench. That woman would always talk my head off. People say I'm a big talker but I swear Roberta would force me to do most of the listening if you can imagine that. Oh, she would talk about her sick mother that lived in Florida and how she had to support her all by herself because her sister in California, a famous writer—I'd never heard of her before—wouldn't do anything to help out. The sister had even said that as far as she was concerned she no longer had a mother. Roberta told me that when their mother was younger, she was a famous showgirl that regularly performed with Liberace in Las Vegas. I think she thought that impressed me. Anyway, the sister was mad at the mother because when they were little, she was always leaving them with this one or that one while she did her own thing. I heard



the story quite a few times but I always showed the same interest as if I was hearing it for the first time. I figured she had some unresolved issues that needed to be addressed and my ear was as good as any.

Anyway, that's the background. Now, back to the story. Steady looking through the peephole, I asked in a phony singsong kinda way, "Who is it?" just in case I got a reply that didn't require me to open my door. She replied like it was something stuck in her throat, "It's Roberta from 3B. Can I talk to you for a minute?" I went ahead and opened the door. I figured that it must be important given the hour and all.

"Miss... I'm sorry. I can't think of your name." "Toni," I said. She didn't know my name because she'd never asked it and I had never volunteered it. She continued, "I know it's late and I really hate to bother you, but I don't know where else to turn. I need a huge favor." I thought that just getting out my bed had already qualified as a huge favor. That's when she looked up and I noticed that her eyes were blood-shot and puffy, like she had been crying all day. I asked her, "What's wrong, honey?" That's when she burst into tears and her hands started shaking terribly. I walked her over to the couch. I wanted to offer her a hug right then, but held back because I didn't know her like that. Then she sat down and told me, struggling to get the words out, "I just found out that my mama's passed on. Even though she was sick, I still can't believe it." Immediately, I tried to console her with words, asking her if there was anything I could do, anything at all. She replied, "Well, actually there is something that you can do. My brother doesn't have a phone and I would be so grateful if you could give me a ride just a few blocks down the way to tell him the terrible news." I told her that I didn't know that she had a brother. All she had ever talked about was that writer sister in California. Then she said through the last of her tears that her brother was gay and the family didn't talk about him much, but it was her obligation to let him know. I agreed. That's when I also let her know that I didn't actually have a car. I figured her mind was too troubled to realize that the only time we saw each other was at the bus stop.

She kind of pulled herself together, cleared her throat, and asked, "What about that gray car that I always see out there in your parking space?"

"Oh, that lemon doesn't run. Besides, it isn't mine. I'm just storing it for my son until management catches on. Don't worry though. I can get my girlfriend Georgia's son Marcus to take us. You say it's not far from here?" I asked.

“No ma’am, not far at all was her reply.” I told her to go on and get her jacket and I’d come to get her when Marcus came.

I called Marcus and he was glad to come. He knew his birthday was right around the corner and I always buy him the best gifts. Anyway, once he arrived we went and knocked on Roberta’s door and she had the nerve to say, “Who is it?” like she wasn’t expecting anybody. When she opened the door, I caught a glimpse of her living room and I swear there wasn’t a piece of furniture in there. Now that should have told me something right there.

Well, we got on the road. She directed Marcus to turn right, stay in the left lane, turn left, go here, go there, until finally we ended up on a dark street with some old run-down row houses that had the potential to look good if somebody ever bothered to fix them up. Anyway, she got out, said we should wait in the car, and that she’d be right back. She didn’t have to tell me to wait in the car because there wasn’t any way in the world that I was going into a strange house with her. She must have been gone a good fifteen minutes and still wasn’t back. Marcus wanted to leave, but I said no, we’d wait. He wanted to know why I agreed to give her a ride in the first place, but it wasn’t any use in questioning my actions now. Then I spotted her. She was heading back to the car, looking more disheveled than before, but if I wasn’t mistaken, she had a newfound pep in her step.

On the ride back, she rambled on and on about her mother being a dancer in Las Vegas, about her mother performing with Liberace and everything. Like I said before, I had heard the story several times, but talking seemed to make her feel better. So Marcus and I just listened as we exchanged little glances between us to show we were in agreement that grieving or not, Roberta was definitely a little off. Finally, we arrived back to the apartment building and she thanked us both over and over again. I felt good about myself. I had truly done a good deed for a neighbor. I slept real well that night—what few more hours I had left to do so.

Well, to make a long story short, about a month passed and I ran into Roberta from 3B again at the bus stop. I asked how she was and how she’d been. She said, “Great” real upbeat-like. I asked her if she had taken care of everything in Florida. She replied without missing a beat, “Oh! I was just down there the other week and Mama’s doing just fabulous. My sister was in town and we took her out to her favorite restaurant and the waiters were going all ga ga over her. She’s a funny old woman, you know?”

Had I just heard her say that her mama was doing fabulous? Her dead mama? I stood there completely shocked out of my mind, but all I could

manage to do was lean my head to the side and give her a forced smile. I know what you're thinking. Why didn't I say, "I thought you said your mama was dead," but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. The first thing that popped in my mind was—this woman is straight-up crazy and given that, I didn't want to be confrontational. The way I see it—it's not a good idea to be on the bad side of Crazy. I was still standing there looking confused when Roberta's bus came and she got on with a quick, "Have a nice day." I just waved.

In another two minutes, my bus arrived. I was on my way to Cuts and Curls Hair Salon to get my hair done. The entire trip there, I just kept shaking my head from side to side trying to figure that Roberta out. I couldn't wait to tell my hairdresser Sandy what just happened. I needed someone else's take on this situation. The way I figured Sandy didn't spend 20 years doing hair, talking and listening, without gaining some wisdom, so I was interested in what she had to say. When I arrived at the shop, I jumped right into Sandy's chair and before she could put that overused cover on me, I had blurted out the entire story just like I'm telling it to you right now. I said, "Sandy, now tell me what you think? Is this woman crazy or what?"

"No, Toni, she isn't crazy, she's just on drugs real bad."

"What? What did you say?" Surely my ears were playing tricks on me. Then that Sandy left me hanging to go answer that blasted phone. *Why don't these folks hire a receptionist around here for that?* I was thinking. After she got off the phone, she returned and walked me back to the shampoo bowls. I had to wait because all the bowls were in use. We sat down in the back waiting area and then Sandy broke it down for me as if there hadn't been an interruption in our conversation. "Toni, that woman came to you in the middle of the night, not as a last resort, but as her only option. She's used about everybody else she knows. She showed up at your door crying and shaking with the hope that you would be a sucker enough to carry her across town to satisfy her fix. She guessed right because you got out your bed, used your resources, and got her to where she needed to go. You said she looked kind of messy when she came out. That woman didn't have any money for a taxicab so Lord knows what type of indignity she had to perform to get her drugs. Whatever it was, it took about fifteen minutes. When you ran into her today, she was in good spirits and didn't remember a damn thing that she had told you before. The sad thing about it is she's probably killed her mother off so many times, who knows if she's dead or alive."

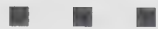
I couldn't believe it. I had experienced a miracle—two speechless moments in one day. After I thought about it, Sandy's theory was making

a whole lot of sense to me. I asked her how she could be so sure she was right. She said, "Toni, my baby brother Charles is a crackhead. I've heard every excuse in the book to get me to give up my hard-earned money and plus he's robbed me and our family one too many times. Once I ran into a lady that he used to work with—can't keep a job, you know—and she looked at me like she had just seen a ghost. Get this. He had told her that I had been killed in a car accident. The office gave him a paid week off and even made a contribution to the funeral fund. They haven't seen him since."

I had heard it all. Roberta from 3B had used me to supply her drug habit. "I'll be damn," was all I could say. Sandy laughed and said, "Expect her to be knocking on your door again for another little favor because people like her will tap you until you're completely dry." She was speaking the gospel truth, but I didn't plan on being anybody's fool again. By this time, I was lying back with my head in the bowl and I could feel the water gradually change from cold to warm to hot. I asked Sandy what I should do if she comes back. Sandy told me what to say and it sounded like good solid advice. As she lathered up the shampoo, I told her not to hold back, to use her nails and wash it real clean. I might have been a sucker once but I've never been tender-headed!

Well, about another month passed and sure enough on a Sunday around 10:00 p.m. Roberta from 3B came knocking on my door again. I remember the time because my show *The Practice* was just coming on. I could have just ignored the knock, but my curiosity wanted to see what kind of drama she had cooked up this time. I grabbed my brand new silky Victoria's Secret robe that my daughter-in-law got me for Mother's Day. It's way too fancy for me. What I really wanted was the family-style George Foreman grill, but she can't catch a clue for anything—to be a big-time lawyer and all. Anyway, I opened the door and invited Roberta right in. She wasn't crying or shaking this time, just looking kind of pitiful. I asked her if everything was okay. She got straight to the point, opting to skip the song and dance, "I sure hate to bother you, but I don't know what to do. They've locked my daughter up for something she didn't do."

I replied, "Oh my goodness, that's terrible. I didn't even know you had a daughter." *Where was she the night I got you that ride?* I didn't actually say that second part out loud. I wasn't trying to hurt the poor woman's feelings. Anyway, she skipped over my comment and continued by saying, "I've raised most of the bail money to get her out. All I need now is \$80. If you could find it in your heart to loan it to me, I sure would appreciate it. I get paid on Friday, so I can pay you back then."



I thought about what Sandy had told me to say. In fact, I had rehearsed it in my head quite a few times in anticipation of this day. With deep sincerity, I looked her right in her hopeful eyes and said what I'd been waiting to say, "I'm so sorry that I can't help you this time, but I will pray for your situation. I have faith that everything will work out just fine." There, I had gotten it out, the perfect answer. Let me break it down to you like Sandy did for me. When you say this—first off, it reminds the person that you've helped them before in the words "this time." Secondly, you're not leaving the person empty-handed. After all, what's more powerful than someone praying for you to the good Lord above? The words "your situation" basically fit any situation that's led the person to your door to request something they don't have, usually because of their foolishness or selfishness.

As I expected, Roberta was the one speechless this time. That's when my heart told me to add a question to the statement Sandy gave me. I said "Roberta, would you like for me to pray with you right now?" She nodded yes as tears began to stream down her face. So I put my arms around her and prayed for the both of us. After she left, I went on to bed since by that time my show had gone off and I wasn't up for watching the news just to get to Jay Leno that night.

To make a long story short, wouldn't you know it? Roberta from 3B never did knock on my door again after that. I think that I may have run into her about three or four more times at the bus stop before I moved away from there and those times. She never did bring her mother or sister up. For a change, she let me do most of the talking and we mostly talked about the news, the weather and stuff like that. I often wonder what ever happened to her.

Anyway, did I hear you say you needed to borrow some money when you came in here? No? I guess I heard you wrong. Now, don't tell me you've got to go so fast. Well, you take care now. Come back to visit anytime and know that you are always in my prayers just like my old friend Roberta from 3B.

Now let me get back to my show. Damn, it's gone off. If I had a working VCR, I could have taped it. Let's see. It's three whole months until my birthday. I guess I better start hinting now if that daughter-in-law of mine is gonna catch a clue.

Lucy Anderton

Letter to a First Love

That snapshot you keep of me
paints my cheeks with a flush...
and brambles of black hair branch
out into my mouth.

Hold that shot to you. Let your finger
prints curl the corners. And know
that when I did lie against you
(still, and with burning patience)

tangled bubbles tumbled from my
silver bones and through the singed lid
of my body to break like a handful
of butterflies over your simple skin.

Your mouth was a perfect wave of sugar
that I could not stop watching.
Words melted from that delicious place.
Sheer and thick, those words
chained me and fed me.

How did you hatch such words that tapped
the clay from my unfinished shape.

It's obscene how easily you turned me.
And I wanted to be obscene with you.
I wanted to open my sweetened skin bruise
for you. I wanted to light wooden matches

in shadows where you might be. I wanted
to leave long black hairs
one by one in the corners of your body
for you to pull off in the shower.



For there was God in the blackberries
I found in your mouth

And when that final door that you slammed
between us is hanging off its hinges
in an aching house. And when I

am an elegant ash of your youth
and your wife holds you
in her soft hands like a letter

I know you will remember me
naked, in a jangle of your words,
while you glowed up against me
in the shell of our final night.

Anna K. Andrade

A Daughter's Secret

Perched on the top of the tallest tree in the backyard, thirteen-year-old Cecilia opens the book and starts to read: "Child, child, sorrowful daughter, Electra, of a degraded mother..."

Her hands are shaking and she can't hold the book still. Her head is spinning and spinning, she's even afraid she'll fall off. She spreads her legs, resting one on a lower branch of the guava tree, and the other on a slightly higher branch, to give herself more balance. She carefully puts the book on her lap and stretches her arms, her eyes closed. She breathes in slowly, lets the air out, and opens her eyes. Down beneath her, she can see her two dogs playing, Coco and Bob. To her left there's the wall that separates their house from the neighbors'; she can see their German Shepherd on the lawn, wandering aimlessly and stopping occasionally to sniff a spot in the grass. If she pricks up her ears she can hear a faint trail of music that's probably coming from Dora's room. Dora's the neighbors' nineteen-year-old daughter, the one who dates a man twice her age. Cecilia remembered how it had been a scandal when her parents found out; they argued for three days in a row, yelling and lowering their voices alternately (she imagined it was because they were afraid the whole neighborhood would hear it), and Cecilia heard everything from her usual spot on the guava tree. That's where she always goes to think, read, listen to the neighbors' noises, observe Coco and Bob, or just stare at the sky.

The images of that afternoon come back to her mind, and she decides she'll have to face it at some point: she can't go on forever trying to pretend nothing has happened. It is the time of the day she always looks forward to, the time when she's done with school, homework and all other worldly duties, and she's free to do whatever she wants, which is usually read. She is a compulsive reader. She doesn't know anyone her age that has read as many books as she has.

She rolls her long red hair into a bun and rests her head against the tree. She stares at the bright summer sky until tiny black dots begin to dance in front of her eyes; she concentrates on the music coming from the other side of the wall and recognizes a melancholy *bossa nova* tune ("Segredo é pra quatro paredes/Primeiro é preciso julgar pra depois condenar...") that brings back the discomfort and uneasiness she's been experiencing since she saw what was happening in her parents' room earlier that afternoon.

She'd return home straight from school, without stopping at Monica's like she did every Wednesday. She had to write a paper for her English class and the sooner she started the better. She went to her room as she always did, threw her book bag on the bed and was beginning to take her clothes off when she heard a moan. She frowned and stopped for a second; it came from her parents' room. Then she heard a man's voice, muffled; she wasn't able to make out what he was saying, but she could tell it wasn't her father's voice; his was deeper. She quickly put on a t-shirt and shorts and tip-toed her way through the hall that led to her parents' bedroom. The door was closed. She pressed her ear against it and heard music in a language that she didn't understand; it sounded like French but she couldn't really tell, it was too low. She heard a vague noise, it could be the bedspring or the armchair, it sounded as if someone was jumping on them, it was the same sound it used to make when she was a little girl and jumped on the bed until she felt her heart would spring forth from her mouth or her mother came and yelled at her to stop. Then she heard a louder noise, the sound of things falling on the floor.

She silently made her way out of the front door of the house and walked on the grass until she reached the window. She squatted down against the wall, opposite the window and looked up; the window was shut but the Venetian blinds hadn't been completely lowered. She crawled until she was under it and stood on her knees, then slowly stood up and peeked through the slit at the base of the window. At first she wasn't able to discern the shapes inside, but after a few seconds she could see the armchair from which her dad liked to watch television every night, sometimes with her on his lap or sitting at his feet, and then the bed, the big beige bed with brown chiffon sheets. To her right, where her mother's vanity table was, she could partially see a man's lower body, pants down around his ankles; he seemed to be thrusting against what she could only imagine was a woman, for she could make out two legs spread open in front of his. Cecilia had her forehead pressed to the glass so tight that it was starting to hurt. She couldn't see much more through the slit. She squinted and pressed harder, desperately trying to see who the woman was, but gave up and instead sat down against the wall, confused.

The first thought that occurred to her was that it was one of the maids with her boyfriend, going at it in her parents' room. The nerve! She'd tell everything to her dad when he got home that evening. Her mom was at work too. Who could it be? Probably the cleaning girl, that Sandra, Cecilia had never liked her. Every time she cleaned Cecilia's bookshelves she never put the books back in the correct places, and then Cecilia had to rearrange them one by one, all four hundred of them. Of course it was Sandra! It

couldn't be Mariana, the old cook. Cecilia giggled nervously. Poor Mariana was so old! She'd been working for them since before Cecilia was born. Her mother said Mariana had been her mother's cook, had been with the family forever. Of course it wasn't her. It had to be Sañdra.

Cecilia stood up again and peeked inside. The man was sitting on the bed, and the woman was standing before him. Cecilia could only see the back of her thighs up to the beginning of her naked butt, she was too close to the window. She lowered a hand and Cecilia noticed it was holding a cigarette between the forefinger and the thumb, the way her mother did when she was home (in public she held it like everybody else, using the forefinger and the middle finger). The nails were long and square, painted with dark red polish. Cecilia looked around the room searching for more clues. An unwelcome knot in her stomach attested that she already knew who was in that room with the stranger, but her brain still struggled with the truth. Shifting a little more to the right, she was able to see new angles. On the back of the armchair there was one of her mother's dresses. She had left in the morning with that fuchsia dress, to her law office downtown.

Cecilia started to hyperventilate, but couldn't bring herself to stop looking. She was mesmerized. The man pulled the woman down to his lap and started kissing her neck. Cecilia started trembling, she didn't understand what was happening but at the same time she did. She just couldn't believe it. Who was that man? She'd never seen him before. A large, masculine hand stroked her mother's back. He kissed her mouth. She made a feline-like movement, arching her back and throwing her head back. They were unaware that they were being watched. Cecilia could now see them from waist to chin, still no faces. She didn't want to see any more, but still she gaped, feeling a soft, tingling sensation down there that only horrified her. She somehow felt involved in the sin she was witnessing, she too a sinner. Guilt, horror and pleasure melted into a big pot of confusion in her head.

She decided it was time for her to stop looking and slid down the wall until she was sitting on the grass again. Suddenly reality struck her in full. She struggled to keep her head clear, she tried to breathe normally, air in, air out, now slower. She stood up and ran to the backyard, to the room behind the house, where they kept the gardening tools and pool-cleaning devices, and where she also kept a box with books, mostly plays that she liked to read aloud balancing herself on the highest branch of the guava tree. She took the first book she saw and climbed the tree, only stopping to think when she got to the top. She ignored Coco, who always stayed at the base of the tree trunk, barking excitedly and trying to follow her up.



Now she's staring at the sky, motionless. She's even forgotten to blink. She feels so numb the light doesn't hurt her eyes anymore. It is a late afternoon sky, the sun is more than halfway down to the West, and in a couple of hours it will be dark. After a few minutes Cecilia shakes her head in a frustrated attempt to shake free her thoughts away, and looks down to the book resting on her lap, *The Complete Plays of Sophocles*. Her hands are lying lifelessly on the book. Hands that are white like her father's, with long thin fingers and pink palms. She brings them to her face and swallows the urge to cry. *Don't be stupid. This happens everywhere, all the time. It's not the end of the world*, she thinks. She thinks of how everybody says she is the spitting image of her father: the same wavy reddish hair, the long limbs and thin lips and slightly slanting eyes, light brown eyes with large dark pupils that make people stare at them hypnotized because they're so unique in their contrasting colors, and the same small nose with the prominent tip. She loves it when people say that, because she can't think of a more handsome man than her father. Ever since she can remember, she's followed him around the house, watched TV in his lap, read her silly stories to him. She always said she was going to be a writer when she grew up, and he patiently listened to her stories about lost dogs and little girls that disappeared mysteriously and old men that lived alone in faraway villages.

Now she's taking a drama class at school and has decided that she'll be an actress and a playwright. This is the reason she's been reading the classic Greeks and Shakespeare, sometimes learning whole scenes by heart so she can perform for her father. He always encourages her to go after her dreams, especially if they are in the artistic realm. He's told her of how he'd never wanted to be a business executive, he'd always thought he'd be a writer. But then he went to college to get a degree, and he met Erica and ended up marrying her. Then he had to work to support the family; Erica was going to graduate school and Cecilia needed a nanny. There was the rent to be paid, etc., etc., and he never found the time to write anymore. He needed a real job.

Once Cecilia found one of his stories tucked in the bottom of a pile of old books under his bed and took it to the tree to read it. It was about a young boy in a boarding school. It was melancholic, in the end the boy runs away and that made Cecilia very sad. This happened when she was ten years old. She begged her father never to put her in a boarding school, ever. He looked puzzled, but promised it. Then she told him she'd read his story and that it'd made her cry. He hugged her and promised that what happened to the little boy would never happen to her. Her father was the only person that saw her the way she truly was. Everyone else thought she was a regular thirteen-year-old (including her mother) whose only difference

from her peers was the fact that she spoke French almost as well as Portuguese, her mother tongue, but he knew she was different, she was special. With others she feels like she can't be herself; her friends don't read the same books or see the same movies, and that drastically reduces the things they have in common; for, as her father likes to say, "You are what you read." Actually, her friends don't even read; it's not something a lot of kids do in Latin-American countries. This played a part in her deciding to be an actress instead of a writer: everybody likes movies more than books.

Cecilia reopens the book and reads the lines aloud, with an overdramatic inflection: "My mother! No, more like a domineering jailer I would say; I who live this miserable life, tormented incessantly by you and your mate." She goes back a few pages and reads: "O you virulent goddess of curses who sees when a marriage bed is fouled—come to my help!" Cecilia's hands have stopped shaking, she's calmer now. At least her mother isn't like Electra's, a murderess. She is good to Cecilia. Despite the fact that she's always been Daddy's girl, Cecilia has to hand it to her mother that she's never treated her badly; the worst thing she does is scream at her when she does something wrong, but she's never even raised a hand to strike her. She's a sweet small woman with straight brown hair and dark eyes, with skin the color of honey and nails that are always covered with red polish. She goes shopping for clothes every week, usually taking her daughter with her. Cecilia enjoys going out with her mother; she laughs a lot and makes funny comments about the people they pass in the mall, making Cecilia laugh her head off. Whoever sees her heading out to work in the morning in her formal outfits will never guess that behind that successful lawyer's façade there is a funny, giggly woman. A woman that watches early Jim Carrey movies with her daughter and slaps her playfully on the butt when she is distractedly walking by, causing her to jump with all the awkwardness expected during one's teen years.

It is hard to condemn a woman like that. And this is why Cecilia tortures herself over whether she will tell her father. He will be home in less than an hour. She'll have to do something. She thinks what her mother is doing isn't fair to him. Cecilia is shocked but at the same time she thinks of all the books she's read about women who have lovers, like Emma Bovary and Constance Chatterley and Therese Raquin and Anna Karenina, usually with tragic consequences. But this is the twenty-first century, things work differently now. Her friend Natalia told her that a friend of a friend's mother once had an affair with a mechanic for three whole years and her husband never found out. The man checked his car regularly, and did so with his wife too, Natalia said with a naughty chuckle.

They're still married. The husband never knew anything. Cecilia feels like telling her father, but then she also thinks that maybe her mother has her reasons. Or not. Do people need reasons to have an affair? Being an only child and growing up among adults has turned Cecilia into a very mature girl for her age. She oscillates between what her heart wants (tell her father) and what reason dictates (it is none of her business who her mother goes to bed with—let her father find it out for himself).

She's my mother, after all. I love her. But I love Dad too. It would hurt him enormously if he were to find out. But it's not fair. He has the right to know what his wife is doing behind his back. Even if it breaks his heart. But she's such a good mother. She'll hate me if I tell him. There will be horrible arguments for days like at the neighbors' when they found out about Dora's boyfriend. Then they'll get a divorce and I'll end up in a boarding school. No, Dad will never let that happen. I will have to choose which one I'll live with, and then I'll have weekends with the other one. Just like Sara, weeks with her mom, weekends with her dad. No, I'll stay with Dad. Then one day he'll get a girlfriend and I'll have to be nice to her and go out with them to restaurants and listen to her talk about the trip they made to Cancun while I stayed miserably at my mom's with her boyfriend ogling me the way the older guys do now when I walk home from school; it will be like Lolita. Or I'll grow up fucked up and will do drugs and date lost cases and blame it all on my parents' divorce. No, I don't want this to happen. Oh my God, I read too much. And think too much.

She looks in the direction of the house and wonders if the strange man is still there. The only thing she remembers about him is that he has big hands and long black hair. Maybe he's really good-looking and irresistible...but he couldn't possibly look better than her dad. Maybe he is a mechanic, too. She'd never accompanied her father to the auto repair shop. It might be him. Or maybe he is a lawyer like her mom, or a cashier at the supermarket. Cecilia puts her hands on the sides of her head and presses them, squeezing her temples until she can't think of anything but the pain that shoots across her ears. She decides she's not going to think about it anymore until her father gets home. She'll stay right where she is and her mother will never know that she got home earlier and saw what she saw.

A fruity smell hangs in the air, the sweet smell of ripe guava, lulled by the sensual tune that drifts out of Dora's window. The air is still and Cecilia feels the warmth that emanates from the earth—or is it from the sun? She enjoys this feeling, this heat that envelops the body and drains away the courage, the will to move, to think. She shifts on the branch and realizes she can still feel the moisture between her legs; she thinks of the first time Eduardo kissed her, his tongue creeping into her mouth, the taste of his saliva, his

hand pressing against the small of her back. She knows that when a girl's wet she can't think and ends up doing things she'll be ashamed of later.

She hears her father's car coming in and wakes from her dreamy slumber. Hours have passed since she climbed up that tree. The sun is lazily making its way to set behind the line of horizon in a semi-circle of pink and orange that makes the rest of the sky slowly turn from blue into purple. The crickets are getting ready to begin their nightly symphony in the dark. She's finished reading two of the plays, *Electra* and *Oedipus the King*, and has considered pricking her eyes with a brooch too, so she'll never see sin or beauty again. *If I were blind I wouldn't have seen anything and would be in peace right now*, she thought broodingly.

Her father bangs the door of his car shut and walks to the swimming pool with the suitcase still in one hand, loosening his tie with the other.

"Where's my girl? Are you there?" he says in a loud voice, trying to see in the dark that's falling over the backyard. The tree stands a few meters from the pool. Coco and Bob run to him and jump around his legs, barking and panting with their long tongues hanging out of their Pekinese mouths. He crouches down to pat their little heads, while Cecilia comes down the tree and to his side. She looks serious, her mouth reduced to a little pink stain under her nose. He looks up and frowns. His fair eyebrows are so close to each other they look like one. Cecilia opens her mouth to tell him everything, tell him how she saw them doing it right on his bed, on *his* bed, how she wants to stay with him after the divorce is settled, how nothing will ever be the same, and then her mom comes out of the house in her slippers and an old dress and a ponytail neatly arranged at the top of her head, and a big smile and eyes that shine so innocently you'd never believe she was with another man just a few hours before in *their* bed, in *their* room, in *their* house. She hugs her husband before Cecilia can utter a single word, and he's going to ask his daughter why she looks so worried and serious but instead he hugs his wife and gives her a peck on the cheek while his daughter bends down to pick Coco up and kiss her little hairy ears and thinks, *I can't tell him, I can't shatter this perfect little world that we live in, it'll pass, all things must pass, and in the end I'll be glad I was never the one who broke up this blissful family. I'll live all my life knowing that some things happen that we don't understand but one day we might, that's why my History teacher says all the time that we are only able to judge facts after a hundred years have passed, we can never judge the present. I'll live with this, I'll never tell anyone and in a hundred years I'll ask Mom why she did it and then I'll know and she'll thank me for never telling my father...*



Susan Atefat-Peckham

Pahlavi Street

She was just fourteen when she sneaked
down Pahlavi Street. No one ever knew.
The doctor sewed her back together
so her father could smile at her suitors
and say "Yes, she is a virgin."

She tucked that lock of hair away from
her sweaty brow and under the silk, but
the Postar already saw. He pushed her down,
his heel at the arch of her back, her body
writhing and curled, and spanked her hard.

She wraps and rewraps her crooked shape,
her dirty, old palm upward, waiting for
the sound of clinking coins or the crunch
of a folded bill, waiting for the children
to offer her nuts or candy.

She begs with the smoldering eyes
of a storyteller, twisting her mouth behind
the black cloth to hide the words from Postars,
curling around herself, pink and tender, selling
her life to the children on Pahlavi Street.

Tiffany Austin

"there is no fixed time for breastfeeding"

Song of Lawino—Okot p'Bitek

1.

it hadn't finished the night before.
I'm late for choir practice, but I have to wait until
he finishes with my breasts
sagging.

Granny forgot to show me how to make sugar tits
and besides I'm out of white cloth and
sweetness.
He's sucking the infinity out of me, then he walks

2.

on hand broken grandfather clocks
swept feet, faded alphabet
lettered blocks

crayola colored
refrigerator pin-ups, tinted drinking glasses beside
grey iron skillets

heart shaped cut-out cotton panties
lynching fog
and swollen breasts.

3.

Wait precious baby, mama's not far
I promise I'll come
Keep counting moons in the sweet warm dark-next night.

Joe Babcock

The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers

I met Chloe at Shades, the sunglasses boutique in the Uptown mall, which is where he worked. I remember the first thing I noticed was his outrageous pair of plastic frames with blue lenses. He looked like such a rock star. He was instantly the coolest person I had ever seen in real life. His hair was spiked with fusions of red. He wore a silver tank top with a picture of the Virgin Mary, red pants, and a black leather belt with steel spikes. I was attracted to him and scared of him all at once. Somehow I knew he was gay. And I hadn't yet seen very many adult gay men. I wanted him to rescue me from my misery and take me to the island of gay men, where sex is carefree and no one there is straight so you can do whatever you want.

So with the determination of a desperate beggar, I grabbed a pair of sunglasses that was perched on one of the racks without even looking at them first, and laid them on the glass counter. We looked down at the same time and I was horrified to see that the ones I had chosen were hot pink and had fake diamonds glued to the lenses in the shape of hearts.

"Nice," he said, nodding as if impressed.

My jaw went slack and I could feel the sweat on my back. "I have a sister," I said, but I knew he could see right through me.

"I'm sure she'll love them."

"She's six."

"Oh, then I know she will," he smiled.

"How much?"

"Twelve dollars."

I took my wallet from my back pocket and peered in. No matter how thoroughly I searched every cavity though, I only could come up with seven dollars, one of which was torn in half and I had been carrying it around for two years.

"How much do you have?" he asked with mock impatience.

"Seven dollars."

He smiled. "Well normally I wouldn't do this, but I wouldn't want to deprive your sister...So they're on the house!"

"Really?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not?"

“Will you get in trouble?”

“Naw.”

“Well, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I stood there for a moment too long and when I came to my senses I said, “Have a good day,” and rushed away. I decided I needed fresh air so I went outside and had a cigarette. I smoked quickly though because I wanted to go back in there and watch him work. I was planning to sit at the Starbucks across the aisle from his boutique, out of his view so he wouldn’t think I was a stalker. I wanted to talk to him but I couldn’t for the life of me think of anything to say. He’d probably think I was a big nerd no matter what I said. He was older than me. I couldn’t tell by how many years, but probably too old for him to want to hang out with me. People in their twenties are always huge snobs to teenagers.

When I returned to the mall I quickly went to Starbucks and got myself a café mocha and sat down at a table where I could see him. I wanted to be inconspicuous so I started reading the entertainment section of a newspaper someone had left sitting there. I couldn’t concentrate on the text though because I was too busy thinking about the sunglasses he gave me. If he had thought I was a nerd he wouldn’t have done that. My curiosity was overwhelming me as I peered over my newspaper to watch him selling glasses to rich suburban people who approached him cautiously. He was far more flamboyant than what they were used to. I wondered if he gave free sunglasses to everyone.

After about fifteen minutes, I couldn’t sit still any longer. I was one of those hyperactive teenagers who can’t ever sit still. In school I was always practically pulling my hair out waiting for the bell to ring. And anyway, I’d *finally* thought of something to say to him. So I waited until he wasn’t busy, then walked over and asked, “Are you guys hiring?”

“Oh, you’re back!” he said, smiling. He had a ring pierced in his eyebrow, so I watched that because I was too shy to look into his eyes.

“Yeah...I really need a job...and I *love* sunglasses,” I said, sounding really stupid.

“Well...I’m not sure if we’re hiring.” He looked at me with suspicion. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen,” I lied. I wouldn’t be seventeen for another six months.

“Well, I can give you an application.”

“Okay.”

He ducked below the counter and began to shuffle through whatever junk was crammed back there. “Here you go,” he said, returning to a



standing position with a crisp sheet of blank paper. "We're officially out of applications so you'll just have to write something about yourself and put your address and your references and all that stuff on it too." He gave it to me with a pen, a professional airiness in his demeanor.

"The manager won't care if I do it this way?" I asked.

"I'm the manager."

"Oh, so you'll be..."

"The one who interviews you? Yeah...We can do it today. Why don't you just go back to Starbucks and write something real quick."

I thought I would die right there. He knew that I was at Starbucks watching him the whole time. Now he was smiling down at me, trying to look sexy for me.

"I'll be back," I said, hurrying away. He wasn't watching me, so I threw the piece of paper in a trash can, put the pen in my pocket, and ran out of the mall, trying my hardest not to freak out about it right there for everyone to see.

I was still thinking about him when I got home and buried my face in my pillow, listening to Tori Amos sing a song about being a major loser when you're a teenager, feeling depressed and fat and starving. He probably thought that I was the biggest idiot to ever live. I was certain that if he ever saw me again he'd laugh. He'd probably be with some other gay guys and see me in the mall and he'd tell them what a freak I was and then they'd all laugh.

I pulled that pen he gave me out of my pocket and looked at it. It was a plain Bic with black ink. There were teeth marks at the end. I wondered if they were his. I put it in my mouth, but it only tasted like plastic. I wanted to know what *he* would taste like. I began to imagine a scenario where I worked there with him, and after work we went into some storage room in the mall and had oral sex. It gave me a hard-on just thinking about his penis. I unzipped my jeans and let my dick pop out. With my eyes closed, still picturing him and imagining his taste, I beat myself off and came all over my stomach. Then I wiped it up with a shirt that was on the floor by my bed and went to sleep, feeling like I had done something wrong.



As I walked through the glass door entrance of the mall, I realized that my plans to meet up with Sam were impossible. I hadn't had the presence of mind to change our usual meeting place and Shades, the sunglasses boutique with the super cute gay guy, was facing the stupid fountain.

I headed toward my destination cautiously, only to find that the same cute guy was working. His back was turned to me, but I could recognize

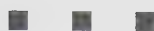
him. He was wearing a black, glittery shirt that was so tight you could see his lean muscles and bronze skin through the knit and blue vinyl pants that merely looked like metal flesh. Since yesterday, his crazy hair had been dyed black with streaks of electric blue and was slicked up into two spikes, like little horns. I bet everyone stared at him when they walked by.

Suddenly he was turning around! He would see me for sure if I just stood there so I backed myself around the corner. I felt like such a jerk. If he saw me again after I freaked out on him yesterday, I'd die! God, I was such a loser. I wanted to be dead...or at least another person, someone who could actually speak to whomever he wanted without crumbling into a blubbering fool right there on the stupid floor.

I was so ashamed of my own mediocrity that I decided I didn't even want to be at the mall anymore. So I left. I knew Sam would flip out at me for ditching her, but I didn't care. I wanted to be alone because the only person I really wanted to be with was the funky sunglasses guy, and I didn't even know his name.

When I got outside I lit another cigarette and sat up against the building. I really had nowhere to go, except home. And I knew that if I went there I'd only argue with my mom more and have to leave again. I began to look through my backpack, which I always carried with me. I was looking at some stickers that Sam gave me, which I stuck to one of my notebooks, and thinking about what I could write for an application. I had to do something. I just couldn't avoid ever talking to him and always wondering if I'd missed out on something great.

I opened my notebook and took a pen out of my denim-blue pencil case. My letter instantly began to flow from me: *"My name is Erick Taylor and I would love it if you hired me because I really need a job and I feel I would be a very successful salesman there because I'm good with people and I love sunglasses. I'm a high school student at St. John's and this would be a perfect place to work after school and on weekends. I'd like to work somewhere in the mall too, so this place would be even more perfect because of that. I appreciate the time I've taken from you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to apply."* Then I finished it off with my phone number and address and everything else. I tore the paper from the notebook and folded it in half. Then I stuffed my junk back into my bag and re-entered the mall, holding the letter between my fingers. I was nervous but determined. I wasn't going to get scared and run away this time. I needed to act like a normal person and just have a normal conversation with him. He won't hate me, I told myself repeatedly. I'm a perfectly fun person to know. Besides, he's gay. He wouldn't just turn his back on some gay kid...would he?



"Hey, remember me?" I asked, approaching his counter, holding out the letter to him before I even got there.

"Oh, hi. I didn't think you were coming back," he said, taking the letter. He smiled as he read it, then he set it down on the counter—facing up! Which made me nervous as hell because someone could come up from behind me and start reading it...I would be so mortified!

"Yeah...well, I was in a hurry to be somewhere," I lied, trying not to let that letter bother me.

"I thought I scared you away."

"Of course not."

"You can be honest...I scare away a lot of people," he said, grinning proudly.

I looked him in the eyes just long enough to say defiantly, "You didn't scare me," then I looked down to his glittery chest. "So?"

"You want an interview?" he asked me.

"Yeah."

He didn't say anything. When I looked up he held me right in his gaze for a few long seconds. He was smirking. I began to wonder if he was *trying* to scare me. "Pop quiz: Who sings, 'What's Love Got to Do with It'?"

"Tina Turner."

"Correct...What are the names of the two women on the BBC show *Absolutely Fabulous*?"

"Patsy and Edina."

"Correct...Who was the gay lead singer of the musical group Wham?"

"Um, ah," I couldn't even think I was so nervous. "Michael Jackson."

"Michael Jackson!"

"No, not him!" I retracted. How could I have been so stupid? Obviously it wasn't Michael Jackson. I honestly had no idea.

"George Michael!" the flamboyant store manager squealed. Then he eyed me skeptically. "Who sings 'Karma Chameleon'?"

I cringed. I wanted to say Cher but I didn't dare.

"Boy George!" he bellowed in disbelief. "I'm starting to get worried about your knowledge of music trivia...Name at least one Cure song."

I thought for a moment. I'd heard of The Cure. I knew that anyone who was cool would be able to respond to that question. Unfortunately, I wasn't cool. I didn't know anything about eighties music, though I'd have given my right leg to have had a chance to watch a VH1 *Behind the Music* marathon before this interview. "Didn't they have that prayer song? 'Like a

Prayer' or 'Give me a Prayer' or"—I began to sing—"Livin' on a prayer...Take my hand and we'll make it I swear, whoa oh...?"

My companion slapped his palm to his forehead in disbelief. "That's Bon Jovi!" he shrieked, overwhelmed by my ignorance. "That's like the difference between planes and trains! How old are you again?"

"Seventeen," I lied again.

"I feel so old!" he wailed. "I bet you know everything about the Spice Girls, right?"

"Well, actually...I'm obsessed with Tori Amos."

"Really?" he calmed down a bit. "The angry one?"

"She's not angry! She's a genius!"

"Hmm...Alright, you're hired...So when do you want to start?" he asked.

It was all happening so fast. "I don't know...whenever."

"You smoke?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go have a cigarette," he said, putting up a sign that said, "Back in five minutes," then locking up the sunglasses in the glass display case. He came out a little door in the back with a cigarette already between his lips. I was relieved to discover that he was wearing platforms. That he wasn't actually six inches taller than I was.

"So, what's your name?" I asked.

"Chloe...Pleased to meet me?" he asked, striking a pose.

I blushed again. He had a girl's name. "Yeah," I said bashfully.

He sprinted ahead of me and I imagined fairy dust trailing behind him like a glitter storm. When I reached the heavy glass doors, he held one of them open for me.

"Thanks," I said, quickly slipping past him.

He followed me out and grabbed my hand. "This way," he said. Together we ran, hands held, through the parking ramp to the opposite end and stood leaning against the concrete wall in semi-darkness, facing the rows of suburban automobiles.

"Do you want to hit my onie?" Chloe asked, brandishing a gold one already filled with weed.

"Sure," I said, taking the onie and the lighter he was offering. I watched his grin as I hit it. For once, I was cool and didn't cough like a lunatic as I exhaled the stream of gray smoke. I handed his paraphernalia back to him.

After he took his hit and banged the onie against the wall to clear the remaining ash, he asked me, "So are you gay?"



!!! Instantly my heart and stomach collided. My brain pumped with so many endorphins I thought I'd float away like a helium balloon. He'd asked me the dreaded question, the one I feared like a cat fears being submerged in water or a vegetarian fears being held down and force-fed raw ground beef. And suddenly my patented "Fuck you" response wasn't appropriate. I knew that I had to tell him the truth if I wanted to be his friend. So I took a deep breath and, as clearly as I could, while my hands spun like pinwheels on my wrists, I said, "Um...Yeah...Well, um, I guess...Yeah. I'm, you know, like...gaaaay." It felt like it took me five minutes to spit it out. Chloe was, after all, the first person I'd ever told. And that was, perhaps, the biggest thing I had ever done.

"I figured," he said casually. "You want to smoke another onie?"

I was instantly in love.



On my second weekend working at Shades, Chloe turned to me and said, "Girl, you need some fierce clothes to show off that bod of yours."

I looked down at my usual black tee shirt and blue jeans, shrugged and said, "I don't know, Chloe."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I just don't think I could dress like you...no offense."

"Course not, dear." He looked at my clothes with a sigh of defeat. "Well, suit yourself. Ha! No pun intended," he added as he began unpacking a box of newly shipped sunglasses. As he did so, he set aside pairs he would later try on and write off as "damaged" if he fancied them.

My big job of the day was to draw a "buy one get one half off" sign for the side of the kiosk. Some vandal had written, "FUCK YOU" on the last one. At first I was just going to fill the page with simple block letters, but Chloe's sparkly shirt and funky hair had given me an idea. I began drawing quickly, sort of hiding it with my forearm from Chloe's view. My picture was a cartoon version of Chloe wearing fierce sunglasses while further pairs of fierce sunglasses filled his hands and pockets. On his tee shirt, using two different colors of ink dots to create sparkle, I wrote Shades. And at the top of the page I wrote in rainbow letters, "Buy one get one half off."

"How's this?" I asked excitedly.

"Fabulous!" Chloe declared clapping. "I love, love, love it."

I laughed in amusement.

"It's so fantastic I just can't even stand it."

"Thank you."

"Can you make one of me?"

“What do you mean?” I asked, a little disgruntled. “This is you.”

“That’s me? I thought it was you.”

I couldn’t believe it. “No, silly, it’s you.”

“Oh honey...You poor thing. That’s you. Just ask Freud if you don’t believe me.”

“Gimmie a break.”

“Oh Erick. My little lost lamb. Just trying to break free from the shackles of oppression,” Chloe said, touching his wrists together to mime being handcuffed.

“No I’m not.”

“Mmm hmm,” he rolled his eyes and continued unpacking sunglasses.

I looked at the picture, then at Chloe, then at myself in the mirror, then at the picture again. Maybe it was me. Maybe it was the me I wished to be. “You really think I could dress like this?”

Chloe looked up at me as if I had just asked the silliest question ever. Then he smiled. “You want to close the store right now and go shopping?”

“Huh?”

“C’m on, it’ll be fun.”

“But I don’t have any money.”

Chloe opened the register and took out \$150. “Here’s your paycheck.”

“Cash?”

“We all get paid cash, sweetie. The owner of Shades Boutique is quite shady himself...I think it saves him on taxes or something.”

I took the money. “Is this for last weekend?”

“Yup. One fifty a week. Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

“Good...Now let’s go shopping!” he said, already pulling the metal gate down and locking up the display case. Before we left though, he took a little bottle out of his bag and swallowed one of the vitamins he took religiously with a sip of Coke. I had noticed the first day that I worked with him that he took a variety of pills, including two or three vitamin supplements, Echinacea for immunity, St. John’s Wort for memory loss, and who knows what else. When I asked about them, though, he just said that if I ever met his mother I would understand, and we sort of left it at that.

The first thing he said I would need to purchase was a new pair of shoes. We went to a store in Uptown called St. Sabrina’s: Parlor in Purgatory. On one side of the brick building it had a mural depicting a cartoon woman standing in flames. The interior décor was very black and they sold



a lot of gothic clothing, costumes, paraphernalia, and also specialized in piercing every orifice imaginable. We were there for platforms. Chloe suggested several pairs, but I fell immediately in love with one pair and couldn't imagine even trying on any others. They were simple: black leather, square toe, and black wood heels. The salesgirl who assisted us wore a perpetual frown and had dreadlocks, several facial piercings, and wore what looked more like a black lace nightie than a dress. Chloe told her that she had fantastic sense to know what to wear on this fabulous spring day. She just rolled her eyes.

"I'll never understand the goths," he said as he watched her go. "Me, I dress in full Technicolor."

"Me too," I decided, walking around the store six inches taller. "I'll take 'em."

"Wonderful!"

Next we went to Marshalls for cute underwear. "When you're building a pyramid you have to start at the base," Chloe said, fanning himself with a pair of red Calvin Klein briefs. "And now we shop," he declared, crossing the six-foot aisle and entering the women's section. I felt very apprehensive about it to say the least. But Chloe pointed out that if I wanted metallic blue flared pants, or red cords, or anything silver and glittery that wasn't as baggy as a damn trash bag, I certainly wasn't going to find it in the men's section in this day and age.

The trick, Chloe explained urgently, to finding a good pair of women's pants when you're a man is to get them tight, low cut at the waist, and to try on at least one hundred pairs. The problem with women's pants is that they give you a hoochie mama look if you're not careful. This is because generally the hips are wider than the waist. So if you're not careful they make your ass look huge and your package look small, which is the exact opposite effect to go for, unless of course you want to do drag. Before even trying them on, you should check for belt loops, back pockets, and deep front pockets. You know you've finally found the right ones when you zip them up and you look like a diva, not someone who could give birth with them hips. We went to three stores before going to Express and finding a pair of black, leather hip-huggers that satisfied Chloe.

"I don't look like a girl?" I asked, standing under an arbor of light bulbs, staring at myself in my pants and platforms as Chloe admired the results of the makeover. I knew that the women in Express were all gawking at us and whispering, but by this time I had grown used to the attention and had even begun to relish it. Being with Chloe made me feel unstoppable.

“You look fabulous!” Chloe declared. “Goddamn I’m jealous girl! I can never pull off black leather as good as you can!” He was talking loud enough for our audience to hear. Meanwhile, I was basking in his compliments like a starlet during her encore:

“Okay, I’ll take ‘em.”

“Divine! They’ll be perfect with a big, fat leather belt. Preferably one with a big, huge silver belt buckle! I saw one the other day at Urban Outfitters that said ‘Acid Bitch.’” He shouted extra loud when he said “Acid Bitch.” “Let’s go try that one on.”

So after purchasing the pants we went and bought the belt. Then suddenly I was completely out of money and I didn’t even have a shirt. Chloe said I couldn’t possibly wait until next week to buy a shirt so he offered for me to come to his apartment and try on some clothes he didn’t wear anymore. I was so excited I thought I might die.

When we got to his apartment, shopping bags in tow, Chloe said that we had to get high before we played any more dress up. So we sat on the futon, listening to Donna Summer’s “Last Dance” and smoking out of Chloe’s big, red plastic penis bong. Once we were sufficiently high, Chloe took a family sized package of Chips Ahoy chocolate chip cookies and a bottle of white zinfandel from his waist-high refrigerator under the counter and as we drank and munched, he opened his closet door and began pulling out piles of clothes. His closet was big enough that you could fit a full-sized bed in there if you wanted a separate sleeping space, but he had it filled, five feet high, with clothes—men’s and women’s. I’d never seen such a wild wardrobe. He could have opened his own thrift store with his clothes alone as the inventory.

As he dug through the pile, he flung stuff toward me that I could have if I wanted and soon we were both undressing and redressing into all sorts of different styles as we danced and laughed and fell over in clumsy drunkenness. I was a sailor, a seventies disco drag king, an acid diva, a tough leather bandit, that chick from *I Dream of Jeannie*. Not only did he have clothes, he had hats, belts, makeup, and jewelry galore. It was so much fun.

And as I watched him undressing and admiring his own beautiful nude feature in the mirror, I ached for him. His dark, lean body was hairless, except for the faint trace of soft black hairs on his legs. He had muscle definition but without the bulk of a body builder. As the wine gave me a buzz, I wondered what it would feel like to touch that body and have him touch my body and hold me in bed. If he had asked me I would have

moved into his apartment that night and lived with him forever. But he never made a pass.

Then, while we were sitting on his floor, listening to Aretha Franklin and dining on buttered egg noodles with parmesan, he began telling me that he was so glad we met because these days its so difficult to make friends with other gay boys because sex always gets in the way, and that we shouldn't let it get in the way of our friendship, because we make such a wonderful team. I grinned jubilantly, agreeing that we definitely made a wonderful team. Inside though, I was devastated. I had never wanted anyone so badly. Yet, I was so in need of a good friend that I was scared to jeopardize what we had. So instead I said pathetically, "I want to find a boyfriend."

"Don't we all baby?"

Duh, I thought to myself. Didn't he realize that I was sitting right in front of him?

"You'll find one," he said reassuringly. "You're a great catch...I bet you'd look great as a blond."

"Really? I've actually thought about dying my hair blond before." Which was the complete truth—if I had ever dared to dye my hair blond before that night.

"Can I dye it?"

"Blond? Sure."

"Really? You know, I cut and dye my own hair."

"You cut your own hair?"

"Sure. My hair grows really fast so I have to cut it all the time," he said, taking his last bite of egg noodles. I had noticed that his hair was always spiked perfectly and that he spent a considerable amount of time in the mirror adjusting it. "You finished?" he asked, still chewing. I nodded and handed him my empty plate. He stood up, took them to the kitchen, and tossed them in the sink. Then he proceeded to rummage through his heart-shaped cabinet. I watched him take a pill out of a bottle and down it with Coke.

"Where can I find a boyfriend?" I asked.

"You never know where you're going to find a boyfriend. It's always in the last place you'd expect, and that's the truth," he said, rejoining me. "Do you want anymore wine?"

"No thanks," I said, lighting a cigarette.

"So, do you want me to bleach your hair right now then?"

"Sure," I said, willing to go along with anything.

■ ■ ■

We sat in the bathroom as he bleached it. I was on the toilet and he stood in front of me with his shirt off. All I could see was his six-pack and it was driving me nuts. I wanted to feel it, and I practically had to sit on my hands to restrain myself. As he worked the bleach into my hair, he sort of massaged my scalp, which tingled and made me feel like I was melting all at once. I was so glad I had come over to Chloe's house. I was starting to think that this was the best night of my life.

Once the bleach had sat in my hair long enough for us to smoke a joint and paint our fingernails blue, Chloe had me lean over the bathtub so he could rinse it. Then, before he'd let me see the results, he had to blow dry it for about twenty minutes, then style it with some Aveda.

"There you go," he said when he was done.

I studied my new reflection with glee. I looked like Madonna in her "Papa Don't Preach" phase. It was better than I had hoped. "Thank you so much, Chloe," I said. "It's exactly what I always wanted to do with my hair."

"You look fierce, girl."

When we left the bathroom I noticed that it was dark out. "Um, Chloe," I began nervously, "I'm not asking this to make a pass at you or anything. I mean, you're right about us being good friends. But, do you think I could crash here tonight? It's getting kind of late and Golden Valley is super far."

"Of course! You don't even have to ask."

So that night I laid with Chloe on his futon. We wore only our T-shirts and underwear. He fell asleep almost right away, but I stayed awake for a long time, thinking about him. He was so close that I could feel the warmth of his body, but I never touched him. I was too afraid of upsetting him and ruining everything. So instead I positioned my hand only an inch or so from him on the mattress, hoping that at some point he'd roll over onto me and we could "accidentally" wind up tangled together, and that he would enjoy it and realize that we were perfect together. But he never budged, and we never touched, the whole night through.



Annabelle Baptista

The Law of Curly Hair

Just think
when I stroll the neighborhood at 6:00 pm
sporting my overly curly hair.
Spongy tendrils spiked tight sprung
against the nape of my neck
make it easy for ideas to spring into my head.
Coiled positive charges that magnetize the air, the lamp posts,
the park benches filled with INNOCENT BY-STANDERS.
Sometimes I think my overly curly hair is illegal.
I've spotted policemen
sitting in their patrol cars, taking notes,
on my unregulated bangin' flat top, but mostly
they can't be bothered this close to the hour
of the next coffee shop.
I glide past them with my head tilted up in my own self-contained
custody.
A wonder that they don't see my feet barely touch the earth
because of some weird law of curly hair?
As the #6 bus pulls away from the curb, I know I will leave this
place. I feel my nerves straining against
every straight county line.

Deanne Bayer

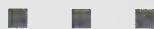
Antietam

Searching for John today,
we overheard the others—"So
much blood," they said, but we
didn't see that
much blood. When Fanny asked
if it could have soaked so soon
into the ground, Mama told us
blood dries
to the color of earth.

I've heard there's a stench
to death, but I can't smell anything
except gunpowder. Yet I can see death
in the cannon smoke hovering
over the battlefield
like deserters
who didn't run far or fast enough.

I suppose the others
who are searching
hope
as we are hoping. But even
if a wounded man were alive
on this septic field—
here among the arms and legs
and body parts
too mangled to know which
part of the body
it once had been, much less
which body
it had been a part of, what life
will be left to him?

They all look like cadavers—
the living, that is. The dead



look like trampled branches
blown down by wind
from barkless trees—war
is not kind to trees.

We didn't find John, and Mama
says that's because he's
not here. She knows
John hasn't dried into earth
with the others—we mustn't soil
hope's bones
with bloody ground, none
of the body parts
could possibly be his—John
is alive somewhere
with his arms
and his legs
and we'll find him
tomorrow—it's merely a matter
of looking in the right place.

Dessie Bey

Ecstasy

As the warm wisp
Of your breath
Gently dances
Across the dew
That rises
From the root
Of my love
I close my eyes
To see
The soul of you
I taste the nectar
Of sweet
Sticky
Honey
As my tongue slips
Missing your mouth
And slides
Over your glistening torso
Until every open pore
Is soaked
With hot lava
Pulsating to escape
Entwined in ecstasy
I trace every bone in your body
With tender
Fingertip touches
Sculpting a masterpiece
Wrapped in intoxicating oneness
Slowly melting
Into euphoric nothingness
Collapsing from the eruption of paradise
Caressing lifelessly
We finally kiss
And say
Goodnight



Michele Bigley

My Sadness Does Not Have Words

My sadness does not have words
It does not know how to speak all your manmade languages
To make it feel better
My sadness has wings of grief stapled in stone to its heart
So whenever it dares to fly away
it is weighed down by the pressure of the earth.
My sadness has no song to sing, nor no actor to portray it
Because my sadness never had time to cultivate a talent
Or make a friend who understood.
My sadness is an obese man,
Who no matter how little he eats, will always grow larger with
each bite
My sadness eats your words, your sickness, your presidents for
breakfast
Gobbling the bones of the starved, the gunned down, the
exploded, for lunch
And saves the lethally injected, the bald-headed babies crying
in the cancer ward
For dinner.
My sadness has no room for dessert filled wishes or dreams
It fills all the spaces between life and death, between real and
make believe
With tears long dried up.
My sadness has no religion to follow,
has no Tibetan Book of the Living and Dying,
no Alchemist to change it from its natural state into a more
beautiful façade.
My sadness knows not how to kiss or make love
It's watched a million sunsets and none have ever broken the
surface of my sadness' walls
Because my sadness is everlasting
like the lava in the core of the earth
Which keeps bubbling and bubbling until it decides it has had
enough
And it explodes in self-destruction.

Jacqueline Bishop

Correspondences

There was another protest in the city yesterday. The streets were blocked, police everywhere, and people rioting, throwing stones, burning tires, overturning cars. There was even some looting and stealing, and two or three persons were killed by the police. Later in the evening, that Prime Minister of ours, the one whose very face and voice is enough to send me to my room with the migraine we both inherited from our long-dead mother, came on the television, pleading for calm and explaining once again like he seems to be explaining more and more these days, why the price increase was necessary. We all know that if oil increases, then everything will go up, and things are already so expensive. Even for people like me who more or less can see their way. How much more we can all take, I do not know. Later in the night, a steady hail of bullets. Tomorrow even more will be dead. Sometimes I wonder if, after all, you are not correct in leaving this god-forsaken island of ours. This island that I both love and hate at the same time. This island that is both beautiful and ugly.

This morning, on my way to the gallery, I paused for just a moment before I started descending the hill into the city. All was calm, green and gentle. Janet was beside me and she was as silent as I, just looking at the city spread out before us. This is, of course, before we got into the hustle and bustle of Kingston. I hear that our murder rate is one of the highest in the world. There is a serious drug problem. We are stretched to the brink and falling apart. And all the time our politicians smile and insist that nothing is wrong. Such is our island. Such is our paradise. Such is our home. But let me not depress you with Jamaica and her problems, which, in any case I remain fiercely devoted to, and have no intentions of leaving.

I see from your last letter that you were in San Francisco. I have to admit, you keep me busy with your moving about. Sometimes in France, then in Canada, then in London, New York. You are such a restless spirit, always moving, always going from one place to another. You have to let me know, in your next letter, just what you were doing in San Francisco. Has your divorce finally come through? Is this a trip to treat yourself for getting out of that mess? I don't care what you say, he was abusive, that husband of yours. I knew it from the moment I met him. That fake smile, that exaggerated laugh. While he was watching you I was watching him. Did I think

things would get as bad as they did? Well, no. And I have to admit that a part of me was hoping against hope that things would work out for you. This time. Plus, he was from a country we have both been in love with. And that skin-tone of his, just beautiful. Yes, I can understand how you could've fallen in love with him, despite his hooded eyes. But let's not go there. Let's try to leave it, your marriage and (hopefully) divorce, where it all belongs: in the past.

Janet and I are still here, living our secret life, watching the love we have for each other blamed for the ills of Jamaican society, daily vilified on television by ignorant people. Sometimes it really is too much. But there are good moments: the Gallery for example, is doing very well. There is much interest in Caribbean art these days, and the naïve work is fairly flying off our website.

Sister, I love getting your letters, even if some of them are so sad. Do you realize that we have been writing to each other, on and off, now for more than ten years? Ten whole years! That is certainly a long time. And, about what you asked me in your letter, what you insisted that you simply needed to know: whether I think Mama preferred me to you, I don't think so. There are, as we both know, three sides to every story: your side, my side and the truth. Mama never did recover from Papa dying; he was the love of her life. The only love of her life. Perhaps I understood this more than you did. Don't you find it odd, that just at the moment when we could make our way in the world, she died? I always suspected she willed herself to die, so she could be with Papa again. Try and forgive her, if you can. We all need forgiveness. I have to run now, but, know I love you and please write soon. Remember, I have always two things to tell you: I love you and I love you. Kisses, Joelle.



Yes Sister, I was in San Francisco celebrating my divorce. Now I am back in France, in an apartment in the 6th Arrondissement drinking myself to death, as my analyst says. Nothing seems to be going right: not my sketches, not the "black" paintings I am making that show bodies in various grotesque poses. Nothing seems to be going right in these dark winter days. I wish I were in New York. Perhaps I should move back there. The energy of that city—it's just amazing. All my drinking buddies, my friends, the time I was in graduate school! Or perhaps I should try London. Or Italy this time, I don't know. Everything seems so bleak and so blank.

I keep seeing him, Moses, wherever I go. Was Paris always such a tiny city? And, what's more, he now has a new girlfriend. A French girl who has no idea what she is getting herself into. It hurts to think I could be

replaced so easily, although I have certainly taken numerous lovers since the divorce. It all happened so fast. And even though, through my drunken haze, I wrote to you saying I was “celebrating” my divorce, it now seems such an odd thing: celebrating a divorce. More than anything else, I am just sad. Sad about what Moses and I were doing to each other in the end. Sad about what became of the very real love we had for each other. When I met him, seven years ago, you remember how excited I was. We’d literally fallen into each other’s arms and beds. I was an exchange student in France, and he was supposed to be my one-year-fling. The trouble is, I’d never had sex quite like that in my life, and god knows I enjoyed having sex and had it every moment I could with whomever I could, before I met my now ex-husband. Moses was my first real match. We used to shake the bed so hard the woman below us would pound the floor with a broom, then we’d go on the floor. We would be so exhausted in the morning. What became of all the loving, of all the bottles of wine, me wearing nothing but rose petals before the fire, I do not know.

We did good work, I believe, his sculpture getting stronger and stronger every year, as did my paintings. We were so sure, even then, we would make it, and, in fact, we did make it; we both have work in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, The Louvre here in Paris, in major collections in England, Italy and Germany, and I had a major one-person show, thanks to you, at the National Gallery of Jamaica. We were both even awarded, at the same time (imagine!) artists grants at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and Moses was part of a group show at the Smithsonian in Washington. Yes, we have done fabulously well. Yet, here we are today. Divorced. Hating one another. Drinking only numbs the pain, but if I’m to sleep I need it. I wake up depressed every day, and not even the little white pills the psychiatrist I’m now seeing prescribed for me help. And, as if that’s not enough, and despite the worst of what I know, I miss the island. Feel at times I would be better off just coming home to Jamaica and taking it easy for a couple of months. Letting you and Janet take care of me. Cook me some good food. I don’t know anymore. While I was in San Francisco, I flew to New York for a few days, where I saw an interview on one of the cable stations with that Prime Minister of yours. It got me so angry I almost pulled all my hair out. Watching him answer the questions put to him, I started thinking he should be called the artful dodger. In response to a question about the hopelessness of the average Jamaican: he told of an incident in which he saw three men on the back of a truck, each with a cellular phone to his ear. “Well,” said your Prime Minister, “if that’s not progress, I don’t know what is.” Just thinking about this I’m getting our mother’s headache;



yes, we really do share much in common. A woman, who was passing through Paris on her way to a conference in Brussels, gave me this brief description of Jamaica: "Always at the edge of violence. A place where you feel anything could happen at any time." I envy your ability to stay, because God knows I couldn't do it. I am only dreaming when I talk about coming home.

I know you hate it that I keep going back to our mother, but the more I talk to this kind and gentle woman I'm seeing, my therapist, the more I understand my life—all my triumphs and disappointments—is tied up to our mother. You talk about her and Papa, about them being very much in love, of her never recovering from his death. I guess you are correct. We were both so young when Papa died. All I clearly remember is my wanting to go to our mother, to have her put her arms around me, tell me everything would be okay after Papa died, but she only put me away from her. Not in a very forceful way, she did it almost gently. She gave me a gentle shove, while she kept reaching for you, pulling you closer to her. I couldn't help wondering if it was because of how different we look, despite the fact that we are twins. No one believes me when I show your picture and say you are my twin sister. No one believes you are my sister, period. Remember all the jokes they used to make at school? I was so pale and you were so dark. You got everything from Pa and I everything, it was said, of Ma. So, from the day he died all I can remember of Mama was how she kept putting me away from her, while reaching for you, taking your face into her hands, tears welling up in her eyes as she looked at you. God, I wanted to be you. I wanted to be dark like you. I hated my pale skin that would never darken, not even in the sun. I was even paler than Ma, who used to say I must be the throwback to some long forgotten Irish or Scottish ancestor. Do you remember the jokes? The endless jokes, about the dark glasses I was forced to wear because the sun hurt my eyes. And the names some of the children used to call me when we were very young: imanimal monkey, dundoos, albino. The list could go on forever. And all the while, Mama staring down into your brown and beautiful face. That was when I knew I had to leave the island, I had to get away. I could not bear the thought she loved you more than she loved me. I could not bear the thought I was not dark enough...

Sister, I am tired and it's getting late. Outside my window I have a fabulous view of La Tour Eiffel, which is all lighted up. Perhaps, when I am done writing to you, I will go and take a ride on the carousel across from the tower. That is what I have been doing lately, riding the carousel for hours at a time, the carousel operators looking at me with frightened eyes.

I probably look like death. Too skinny with all the weight I have lost and I was never a big girl to begin with. The other day I got up out of myself and decided to buy some new clothes. I wanted green, yellow, and orange dresses. I don't know why, but I just needed to have dresses in those colors. When, finally, I found such dresses in a store (no easy feat given it is winter here and these are summer colors) and went to try them on, I was shocked at my naked body in the mirror. I turned around and around in the mirror in the dressing room: my once upright and full breasts sagged, as if sucked dry of something essential. My belly was sunk in and my ribs, I could actually see them. I hurriedly put back on my clothes and fled from the store. The woman in the mirror, the woman who looked no more than a pale corpse, was not a woman I knew, or, in my wildest dreams thought I could become. I was running as fast as I could, away from that woman—the one in the mirror. Back in the apartment I used to share with Moses-the-Magnificent, I took refuge in the little white pills and the bottle of Tia Maria beside my bed. I knew I should not have taken them together, the pills and the alcohol, but I needed some relief immediately. I'm tired. So very tired. Why didn't Mama take my face into her hands, like she did you, and tell me I was beautiful? Why?



I don't mean to be glib, but if you lived on this island as it is now, you would not have the luxury of a nervous breakdown! About a month ago someone tried to break into the house, despite the elaborate security system Janet and I are spending a small fortune on. Janet cannot sleep since the attempt, every sound is suspect, and she keeps jumping up. And, as if that wasn't enough, someone took red paint and wrote across our freshly painted white walls, You nasty dirty women!!! You will surely burn in hell!!! Sodomites Be Ware!!!! That seemed the last straw for Janet who just broke down and started crying and shaking uncontrollably. We could not open the gallery for one whole week, so you can imagine all the money we lost. And in the middle of taking care of her and trying to take care of myself, your letter arrived. I read it briefly, only once, and perhaps in the future I will have some chance to give it more thought, but I think at this stage in the game it is rather late to think about who was more beautiful, and who was not. My understanding of things is it was you who got the boys' attention. It was you who everyone thought was beautiful. People would come close just to see your pale eyes that changed colors with the weather and the clothes you wore, your eyes that even changed colors with the room you were in. People found this all amazing. I used to watch you from the

sidelines, watch the boys line up at our door and fight to take you out. No one ever fought to take me out.

I believed Mama used to tell me I was beautiful, because she took it for granted that you knew you were beautiful. Mama, I believe, felt she had to work harder to let me know I was beautiful. Plus, like you said, I had the face of our father, of the man she always loved, the only man she ever loved. Did you know I used to cry at night when you were home? I thought it a cruel joke that two sisters who were twins should look so different. We looked so different people would never even think we were sisters. What craziness it all was.

As to the reason why you left Jamaica; I really don't see how you can blame our mother for this. The island, after all, is not our mother. Again, my understanding of the matter is you left because you felt Jamaica was not conducive to you becoming the person you always knew you were: an artist. You wanted to go to a place, or places, where you could get grants to do the work your soul needed to do. If you were going to die doing it, you said to me one day when we were both naked on the roof of our mother's house, enjoying the afternoon sun, your skin, as I remember it turning a beautiful caramel-color, before deepening to a dark bronze, you were going to be an artist, there was nothing you wanted more. I believed in you then, as I believe in you now. You have become the person you most wanted to become: an artist. As for me: I only sell the work of the artist. I have to run. Janet needs me. Love and kisses. Joelle.



I am horrified about what happened to yourself and Janet, and I'm relieved that you are both okay. Or so it seems from your letter. It is a horrible thing to feel unsafe in one's own home. Dare I say: that is part of the reason why I left the island. I just never felt safe—one way or the other. If it was not my skin color, then it was something else. How did you and Janet find out about the attempted burglary? And, dare I ask, has anyone been apprehended? But, that too, I guess, like my "breakdown," is "glib" of me to ask? As we both know, the police on the island have never been good at anything, except killing people.

I am so sorry about Janet. And I can only imagine the tremendous burden you are under trying to take care of her and yourself. I have to shake my head when I look at we three women of the private girls' school. Women who men were supposed to take care of. Not one of us now, with a decent man. Oh, I can already hear you say what you have always said: the burglary is about you and not about me. Can I for a moment just step

out of myself and empathize with what you are going through? Believe me Sister, I do empathize, and the day I got your letter, I had to take to my bed again, this time with gin and tonic, plus a whole different set of white pills, I started shaking so hard. I cannot imagine the world with you not being in it, even if we hardly get to see each other anymore, even if there is all this water between us. All this distance. But I can't help wondering Sister—can you empathize with me? Do you remember the dolls our mother bought us when we must have been about ten? The ones she bought in America, because she could not find dolls that color in Jamaica? Coffee-colored dolls, with bright-red lips and large dark eyes. Remember how I could not bear seeing those dolls anymore, the stiff plastic legs, the soft middle that actually was made of cotton, but Mama told us was made of honey? Remember how those dolls could not be found after a while? Well, I have a confession to make: I buried those dolls in the back yard because I could not stand looking at them anymore. Those two smiling glass-eyed dolls used to give me nightmares. I don't know why Mama brought them in the house in the first place. They were so pretty, too pretty in fact, with their curly black hair, their cherry-red lips and fat cheeks. The fact they were always smiling positively scared me. It is only now I understand why: they were perfect little adornments. Something to make something or someone else happy. Since I always felt like that, I could not live with those dolls in the house and had to get rid of them. You have the luxury of knowing that whichever man or woman loved you and wanted you, wanted you for yourself. Not for your skin color, not for the "quality" of your hair, not for the color of your eyes. You were wanted for yourself. I never felt wanted just for myself. Never. Not once. All the boys and men who wanted me, who I gave myself to and who took me, could, as far as I was concerned, be entering and leaving one of those very-expensive dolls. So I buried them, those two dolls, far into the ground. Late one night when everyone was sleeping. As I buried those dolls I thought, it's no use talking to the men I was seeing about who I was, that I could draw and paint and wanted to be an artist. Fine, they would say, so much the better, an artist to be my wife. What could be a better catch? I always saw them measuring how I would look beside them; what their friends would think.

I hate that word "glib" you use. I would really appreciate it if you did not use it with me again. It is really a quite frightful and hurtful word. It reminds me of plastic legs and soft "honey" insides, that word "glib." And, if I am anything, if this divorce has taught me anything, it's I am anything but "glib." Marie-Noelle.



Here is another version to our childhood: before he died, Pa would pick you up and glide you around the room. He would make an airplane of your small soft body. And he would tell you that you were the milk in his coffee. The one that would not make his coffee too dark. He said this even when I was sitting at the table. He always had a certain sparkle in his eyes when he looked at you, for you meant the world to him. I would leave the table and go sit by myself under a tree, and still he would not see I was gone. I think it was because of this why Mama started taking my face into her hands and telling me just how beautiful I was. I bet you do not remember this, do you? Yes, you were our father's princess. His pale princess. The child he could not believe he was so fortunate to have. I think that despite how successful our father's garage became, that no matter how much money he made, no matter that he owned houses in some of the best places on the island, and moved his family into a large spacious five-bedroom house in the hills, far away from the dirt and pollution of the city, he never got over the fact that someone like himself ended up with a woman like Mama. A woman who had gone to all the best schools, and even had a university degree from abroad. And, to boot, she'd given him a child even paler than she was. A child with his blood running through her veins—for she was born just after a darker child who looked just like him. You know what he wanted to name you, I overheard someone say one day, when I was no more than about five or six? He wanted to name you Precious.

"And what did he want to name the other one?" the person asked, referring to me. "Oh, he didn't have a name for her. He left it up to her mother to do that."

"Oh," the person said, "that is interesting."

"Very," the other person replied. "Of course their mother was against the whole idea and named the girls Joelle and Marie-Noelle."

"And which one is which?" The person asked.

"The dark one is Joelle, and the lighter one is Marie-Noelle."

"Pretty name, Marie-Noelle." The person said.

"Pretty name, Joelle, too." The other person replied.

But I did not feel pretty. I felt you with your coloring, your hair and your eyes, took up all the light in the room. Because of you, my star could not shine bright. All the boys, and I do mean all the boys, wanted you.

I know you have always wondered why I did not cry at our father's funeral. Believe me, I have shed many a tear for him in the years since. Part of the reason I didn't cry, of course, was I was too stunned. One day he was

a strapping healthy man, picking up Mama in the kitchen and wheeling her around, before planting a big wet kiss squarely on her delighted mouth, and the next minute they could not separate him from the car that'd fallen on his chest when he was under the hood, working on it. I knew, even before the nuns called us into the office to take the call from our hysterical mother, what had happened. For, while doodling on a piece of paper on my desk, I had, for whatever reason, drawn an image of a car coming down on my father's chest. So, yes, I was stunned and numbed and, truthfully, just a tiny bit relieved at his passing. A kind of relief you feel when a silent tormentor has gotten his due. Not that our father was willingly tormenting me, but still...that was why I never cried.

I am glad, finally, to know what happened to my doll—what happened to both the dolls—I treasured so much. For weeks after they disappeared I was still crying. I thought I would never stop crying. I loved Bubbles, the name on the tag for my doll. I can still see her. She was tall and dark and beautiful. It was the first time I'd seen a doll who looked half-way like I looked. All the dolls prior to this looked like you. And what did you do to the one thing I was absolutely delighted to have in my possession? The one thing that looked like me? You destroyed it. Perhaps the kind and gentlewoman you call your analyst is correct: perhaps some things cannot be forgiven. I feel like this is one of those things. How did you live with yourself, knowing for weeks I was sobbing myself to sleep? Watching Mama fret and worry about me because I was not eating? Her calling her sister in New York to see if she could find another pair of the dolls, I was so distraught. How did you feel when Mama's sister wrote back to say the dolls had been handmade by a woman in Harlem who was now dead? How did you live with yourself? You scare me Marie-Noelle. Really you do. I don't think I can forgive you for this.



Now who is being “glib” sister? The person who is talking about how she looks or the woman who cannot forgive what happened to a plastic doll from so many years ago? You see what I mean about that word “glib.” The truth is, Joelle, in my mind, I was saving both of us a lifetime of hurt and pain that even as a child I knew those no-good dolls symbolized. I did not care if they were dark like you or pale like me. They were still a trap, with their stiff crinoline dresses, perfect little bonnets, and those wicker baskets in their hands. Those horrible dolls even came complete with white aprons. They were as horrible as those with white aprons. They were as horrible as those souvenir dolls sold in tourist shops and craft markets all over the Caribbean. You know the kind I am talking about, the fat dark market



woman who is forever smiling. How cheerful those full-figured women must be, having worked the fields themselves, then selling their produce in the market! Some of them even coming complete with their own “beasts of burdens,” their own mules. I don’t care if the dolls were dark, pale, or even Chinese. They all have those ridiculous smiles, and all their lips are slightly opened and cherry-red... Need I go on? Yes, it is true, I pulled the dolls to pieces before burying them in the back yard late one night. And guess what? Their insides were not made of honey like our mother said—but, instead, stuffed with cotton.

I feel I do not know the person who wrote the last letter. The person who could say those things about the most amazing person I have ever known in this world: the funny, jovial, happy man we were both blessed to call our father. Yes, there was a sparkle in his eyes when he looked at me, like there was a sparkle in his eyes when he looked at Mama, like there was a sparkle in his eyes when he looked at you. The trouble is, you were never looking to see when his eyes alighted on you with pleasure. Pa loved you as much as he loved me. And he tried, he really tried to engage you, but, let’s face it, you just were not interested. You preferred to trail behind Mama wherever she went. Like you were a part of her dress or something. You have no idea how much that bothered Pa, the fact that he knew you did not like him. All the times he reached for you, and you would angrily pull away. You were a sullen, resentful and angry child. You were always angry. Very angry. And you took your anger out on our father because he was dark. Yes, now I see it, we were both angry. You were quiet in your anger. I fucked everything that ever walked on two legs. Our father is not the man you describe.

For a moment since our last letter there was a real scare. I missed my period and thought I was pregnant. I was really frightened. Who would be the father anyway...there have been so many since Moses. Plus there was the drinking and the pills. It turned out not to be the case that I was pregnant and I did not know whether I should laugh or cry. It now looks like neither of us will ever have children. Have you ever seriously contemplated Sister—that we are the last of our family? You know, that was one of the problems between Moses-the-Magnificent and I: He did not want children and I wanted them. Have you ever heard of such a thing, a man not wanting children? These days, did I tell you, he looks happy, plump and relaxed, that even-paler-than-I woman on his side. She is now sporting a huge diamond engagement ring. And to think how much I had to fight for what little I got in the settlement. I don’t know what to think. Perhaps they are in love—who is to tell? It stings, really stings, to see just how well-fed and

happy he looks while I am melting way. The analyst keeps saying I have a choice, and I can choose to take care of myself. I do not feel like I have a fucking choice!!! I can't say that loud enough. But then who is here to hear me say it anyway? I have never felt more alone. And now you are angry with me. Perhaps, rightfully so. It is spring, usually my favorite time in Paris. The trees on the Boulevards are filled with a million white blossoms. But this spring, I am down in the dumps. Really down in the dumps. I keep thinking more and more that I should leave France. Try somewhere else. Go back to New York. To Montreal? Some place else. Jamaica?

I do hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me for the dolls. In my mind I was trying to save us pain, which now seems to me quite silly. No one can ever prevent another person from feeling pain. I hesitate to say this, but there was also another reason why I buried the dolls: I wanted to stop the growing rift developing between us. How people responded to our color was really tearing us apart. Perhaps I was wrong in destroying the dolls. I have always felt somehow I was wrong. That whatever I did was wrong. Like you've said: everyone needs forgiveness. Marie-Noelle.



There was another riot on the island again Sister. This time food prices were going up. It's no use even telling you what they are now, food prices—because for damn sure they will not be the same price next week, but more. Of course someone, or more than likely several persons, was probably killed in what is being called, euphemistically, “the unrest.” Once Janet heard of this latest riot she immediately went outside and started digging up the place with a pick. I tried to stop her, but I could not. She kept murmuring something about wanting flowers and it was her birthday after all. In the process she dug up the dolls. Feeling very much near the brink myself, I asked her to please put them back in the ground, they were such a horrible sight to see: their middle parts all torn out (you really did a number on them!), dirt sticking to their clothes and hair, still those ridiculous (you were right) smiles and bright red lips. One of their eyes popped opened and I saw they were not brown like I remembered them, but dark blue. I looked at the doll for a while before I gently laid it back in the earth (along with the other), where I now know they belonged, all the while wondering how a child your age could have dug so far down into the earth. These days Janet is busy planting flowers, watering the earth and waiting for them to grow. So many flowers she has planted: Periwinkles, Joseph Coats, Tiger Lilies, Anthuriums, and our favorite: Easter Lilies. Flowers that she grows from packets I have in the house. Flowers that will not grow past her knees. Flowers she can control.

Marie-Noelle, I think it's time we really forgave our parents for their shortcomings. I think it's time we really put the past behind us. If we must, let's go through what our parents did to us one last time and then be done with it. We cannot afford to lose each other, and both our parents are very much dead. I want you to think about coming to the island. I want you to think about coming home. Even for just a couple of weeks or months. Despite everything going on on the island, it will do you good. It will give you a kind of perspective. And I do believe the island is your home.

One of the saddest things I have noticed in your letters to me is you no longer talk about your work that you were always so excited about. You no longer tell me about the paintings in vivid blues, greens, and yellows you used to talk about. Whenever I looked at your paintings I knew I was really seeing you: the talented artist you have become. Let's not fight anymore. We are, after all, and always will be, Sisters.



You are right of course. Let sleeping dogs lie. And the therapist I am seeing says while I should try and learn from the past, I need not relive it. After getting your letter, I went down to my studio. Everything was so dusty: I hadn't been there in months. I took my time to clean out the place, and then I set up my easel. I did not have a painting in mind, but once I started mixing the colors, I knew I wanted to do "blue" works. Blue like the Caribbean sky and sea. So that is what I am doing these days. And the work is just pouring out of me, just landing on the canvas in waves upon waves. It is coming from a place deep inside of me. After these "blue" paintings I am going to do "purple" paintings, my color for sexuality, and I am going to go out and find myself a lover to top all lovers, one even better than Moses-the-Magnificent (!), who had a stunning wedding the other day, carried in all the papers.

I am sorry to hear about Janet; she really seems to be taking what is going on around her very badly. I always felt she was a very fragile person, made more so because her entire family turned against her when they found out about you and when she moved in with you. Still, I find myself having another thought about her. Perhaps her reaching for the flowers is like me reaching for my paints and you reaching for the diary you have always kept. Perhaps the flowers will keep her calm and make sense of all that is going on around her. Perhaps I will come to Jamaica for a while, or I might not. I don't know. The important thing is I'm painting again, and we are writing letters to each other again.

Joseph Bisz

The Party

The invitations were marked for 7 p.m., but somehow the majority of guests rang the bell during the half-hour before 8:15. April Pocket was the proud arbiter of the evening's celebration, and magnanimously spiraled out from her leading position in the kitchen social circle to greet friends in the flesh or through the plastic intercom. After spending ten minutes commuting between duty and pleasure she cleverly balanced a wedge in the apartment door and fixed her own self in the living room where another circle immediately drew round.

It so happened that Elizabeth and Kyle arrived after the door had been left permanently unguarded.

"Is this the right place?" whispered Kyle, noticing her confusion.

She called out someone's name. Then she grasped Kyle's hand, and they threaded their way to one side of the living room. A woman in a black-sequined dress, listening to an animated discussion, turned slightly at their approach.

"Elizabeth! I am so glad you could come,"—hugs—"and what a nice outfit you have, and this must be the boyfriend!" Glittering like her dress, a pretty outline of eyes turned to Kyle. He said his name and offered his hand; she squeezed it and replied, "Theresa!"

"You didn't answer me," spoke Elizabeth.

"I can't hear anything at all. Only what this lovely man was saying about—furniture."

"Mr. Walsh; happy to meet you—?"

"This is Elizabeth Neel, one of my workmates and friends." Hands.

The older gentleman had turned to Kyle quizzically; now they shook hands. Kyle wondered if he was someone's father.

"Oh—Jenny!"

Theresa pivoted her sequined back, putting Kyle and Elizabeth in a pocket by themselves.

"Outfit?" Kyle whispered, lifting his eyes.

"It's a compliment. It means she's jealous."

"Well, who wouldn't be," he returned, his mouth performing something of a smile.

He thought she was doing likewise, but upon closer examination he saw her face contracted in tension. After a moment her eyebrows refocused and fell back onto him.

Theresa turned back, speaking lowly. Kyle turned away and caught Mr. Walsh smiling at him.

"Did you just arrive?" he asked Kyle.

"Ah, yes."

The gentleman wore an old-fashioned brown suit and vest and khakis. He rubbed a large forefinger against his nose as he spoke. "Well I must say it's a wonderful party. No pressing responsibilities here. I should tell you there is a refreshment table there"—he cocked his glass towards the back of the room, and the overhead garlands of lights made the wine bottles glow like embers—"and another in the kitchen. A bed for coats in the back. You might want to know. Wonderful people everywhere, doing wonderful things—you should meet some." Then, as if continuing what seemed to be a hosting attitude, "So what are you in the line of, Mr. McGovern?"

Kyle explained that he designed video games and software for Tomorrow Electronics. Mr. Walsh worked for Nanotech, a company "dedicated to saving lives." Kyle had heard of them; they manufactured miniaturized electronic components such as hearing aids, but also body replacements. "It is very difficult to hypothesize the timing, or even the emotional value, of some of our hormones, however." Mr. Walsh described an ongoing chief project: the development of a mechanical heart.

"Purely mechanical? Is that possible?" asked Kyle.

"More than possible—probable. In fact, if I hadn't feared my niece finding me in poor taste, I would followed my original inspiration of bringing it along tonight," he waved his wine glass, "and displaying it under the Cupids."

"Don't let him sell you one," Theresa interrupted. Kyle turned; Elizabeth was looking steadily but brightly at him, and he felt her hand squeeze his. "I see that! Come on, Kyle, you can't hog her to yourself; it's time she had a drink. Have you met April yet?" she asked Elizabeth, garroting her arm.

Kyle turned back to Mr. Walsh, but he was gone. He decided to put his coat away. But he should have taken Elizabeth's. He glanced again to the path she and Theresa had taken—near the arch dividing the massive living room in half—and decided to give her time.

Open doors throughout the large apartment already filled with more than eighty guests lead to a kitchen, two bedrooms, a study. One of the empty bedrooms, the larger, had an Emperor-sized bed tossed up with

half-a-dozen white pillows, as well as a full spectrum of jackets, furs, and raincoats. Below the dresser's brass-rimmed mirror three vases held vast bouquets of differing flowers and posed porcelains showed two children kissing, a man looking surprised at a clock, a woman in an apron pulling a pie from an oven. The mirror doors to the closet reflected the whole of the room back again, as if in it there could be something he had misinterpreted, something he had ignored. He added his coat to the litter.

After another half an hour, the throng of guests increased, chattering and sipping between rooms of collectibles left out for examination and the kitchen's blanket of fuchsia food: dishes of apples, cherries, strawberries, grapes; bowls of iced crab legs and shrimps, eggplant. Scattered in what had become a haphazard border around the outerspace of the barely visible black tablecloth were the rejected red foils of eaten Caramello's and Hershey's Kisses.

The crabs and eggplant glowed. Inertia crept up Kyle's throat; he put his plate back down.

Pocketing a Hershey, he turned on his heel and headed back into the living room as hands around his body scooped off the tables. Walls of well-groomed guests sprung up suddenly on three or four polygonal sides of him, strange female eyes turning as he maneuvered himself and the torch of a visibly tipsy cup beyond. It was dangerously crowded; he hoped someone was watching the door; the importance of fire codes impressed itself on him. It was really impossible that anyone else should be allowed in.

The whole while, especially if he had already delivered one within ear-shot, he had conserved his excuses as carefully as if their bursts of power were a limited stock. He had finally arrived at a congested point close to the arch—the animated conversation around him seeming to incline each guest towards immovability—and he could not help but voice the despicable refrain:

"Excuse me—"

A woman in a yellow dress, slightly taller than him, stepped back from a second wall of guests.

"Yes? Are you looking for the table?"

"No—I'm just trying to get this over to someone—over there." The cup gestured, and liquid splashed onto his hand.

"Oh! Really! Quite brave! Well then, I approve, Mr.—"

"Kyle, Kyle McGovern."

"Kyle," she repeated. "And which of my dear friends has the honor of having you as her errant?"

"Well... her name is Elizabeth. Miss Neel."



"Oh, Theresa's friend!—and soon to be my own, I hope; just as I hope you will be my friend," she said, giving him a keen look that could not be called unpleasant. Kyle smiled obligingly; he did not know what else to do.

Then her dress, spotted with colorful cups of flowers, turned aside as normally as if she was a door, opening a large space behind her. Kyle quickly scanned the long ellipsis of faces, standing as closely and respectfully about a second low table of glasses and bottles as if watching a fight. Elizabeth stared at him. He walked halfway around the table to join her.

As gently as if he were weighing his own presence, he touched her. She did not respond; no heads had turned to her; she was looking off with interest into the room beyond April. He reflected on the fact that Theresa was her workmate. Perhaps she hadn't actually felt him; he tried again. She moved her head slightly, and her eyes finished the distance.

"Enjoying yourself?" she asked, with a smile.

"Sure."

He glanced to where she had been looking, then engaged his lone self in a honest conversation, the conclusion of which told him: he had not been trying. No; by simply standing near the only person he knew, not "mingling," he was not being fair. Then it dawned on him. Of course! It was a test, a test of his attachment. But what was his actual failing. Leading to the test.

"Kyle!"

"Yes?" he said, greatly surprised.

"Could you fill this for me?"

A thought brushed him, but he repelled it immediately.

"Of course," he replied. He was grateful for the opportunity.

Elizabeth looked pleased. The limited lighting seemed to spotlight off her dress, her neck. Kyle shut his eyes.

"STOP ACTING like a child," scolded April, her red lips curling from a smile to a frown. "You can't give in on every point, you know."

The woman being addressed patted her short brown hair as if to keep it closer to her head. She wore translucent blue sleeves, which only heightened the skeletal look of her wrists.

"In Chicago it was worse. He never stood up for me when we went out with his parents. It's better now; he's not that bad; I'm not complaining at all. I just wish he wouldn't talk about me the way he does. I suppose it's his right; I suppose that's what I'm doing right now."

"You should just leave him, Lucy. We're your friends, we know what's right." This was spoken by a girlfriend and Lucy looked miserably towards

the carpet. Several strangers began to offer opinions and Lucy's head swiveled from one to the other anxiously.

"Things might get better—"

"—it's good you're still trying to help the relationship."

"Do your parents know?"

"Does he make you happy?"

This last question seemed to stun her, until her head began to nod with vehemence.

The night had grown late, and April had gathered some of them into the smaller bedroom, where the chairs were folded away, the collapsed vertical bed pushed to the corner; and everyone made a circle on the floor, save for April and two others on a couch. Kyle sat next to Lucy.

"I posit that the expectations we have for each other always conform to a code of behavior. One's closest circle of friends serves as the social ego. What do we think?" asked April.

This was agreed and disagreed with—both violently.

"What about you, Art?" continued April, smiling.

In Art's face Kyle saw the same look of discomfort that had occupied his own a moment before. "Well, ah—really, I can't say I have an opinion."

"How unfortunate for us. Perhaps your better half—Audie—does?" suggested April.

Audie shook her blond curls, and leaned against Art's head. "Oh, whatever you want, you want!"

Lucy stared into the midnight roses in the dress of her lap. "Every man I've been with wanted something different," she said suddenly.

"But they all want the same thing," giggled another.

Lucy grew bolder, and clutched her glass. "And he only likes...he says he'll only go inside if I let him from behind."

Silence.

"If Art said that to me—" began Audie.

"But I wouldn't," mumbled Art.

April's lips puckered as if tasting something unsatisfactory. "I think it's time for a game."

"Oh! I'm no good at games," spoke Lucy.

"It's a Valentine's Day game, and it's very simple." April smiled broadly and as she explained the rules everyone became more attentive and uncomfortable. "First, everyone will need full glasses, or cups."

Elizabeth picked up the two columns of plastic cups and looked at April. April looked warmly at Elizabeth.



"It must be something that has happened to you. You are allowed only one 'pass,' if you really cannot think of a good, romantic answer to the question. But then you better have something good for the next time. James, why don't you begin."

James put his finger into his ear, looked at it, then placed it against his nose and tried to examine it from that position. He seemed unable to comply. He stuck his hand in his mouth and scratched his tongue before glancing at her suddenly. "Do you mean strange things, like, with animals?"

April said nothing for several moments; then, "Why don't you leave the room and check on Uncle?"

After he was gone April got up, her dress falling back over her bare ankles. She dimmed the light in the room, and from this standing position each feature of her face softened as she looked at her guests. They all looked back, and immediately began to feel pleasantly blanketed with a thick and fuzzy layer of trust. "Now it doesn't have to be vulgar. But it should be interesting. And do be truthful; it is much more fun that way."

And so the game began, with April asking the first question.

"How many people have wanted to kiss one of their cousins?"

April and several others raised their hands; these people were obliged to take a long drink.

"Is that why you sent him out of the room, April?" smirked a girl, who was sitting Indian-legged.

"I assure you I have more charming cousins to choose from. Besides, I said wanted to. Am I to be tried for my desires?"

Next, a shy girl asked if anyone had ever tried to break off a sibling's relationship without their knowing.

Almost everyone's hand went up.

A young man demanded to know if their date's parents had ever hit on them—and what on earth did they do about it. Hands raised, but April quickly cut short the ensuing conversation. Gradually it seemed that to "win" you needed to state something that would get everyone to drink and yet be unbearably ridiculous. Yet if the stake was too high, the offered transgression began to turn itself under the group's noses with an embarrassing light.

"You are a lovely little court," called April, as the group began laughing at one unfortunate, along with the two who had voted for him.

"How many people have had sex in a swimming pool?"

"What kind of sex?" shouted someone.

"Any kind—but underwater!"

“How many people have made love in their parents’ car?” asked a girl, giving an idle caress to the blushing man next to her. The game had to continue to be a game.

The noise of the kitchen party spilled in as a well-dressed young man with one rolled up shirttail stepped inside and shut the door quickly behind him. He took a sitting position directly across from April, and gave her something like a clever look.

Lucy’s face was fixed with a contorted expression of absolute calm, her cheeks and mouth bulging, as if she had silently screamed her features into position. But when her turn came, she said, “Pass.”

The carousel turned to Kyle.

“Pass,” he said.

Someone asked who had had more than one partner at the same time. The next person, Theresa, with one leg stretched out before herself comfortably, asked the same question, but added: not in the past, but right now.

Someone snickered. Kyle thought he had seen Elizabeth’s hand raise at some of the more despicable questions—but he no longer seemed to understand what was being asked of him. A pause, and her voice was heard:

“Pass.”

“Here’s a good one for you couples. How many of you that are sitting next to or across from someone right now—someone you respect, perhaps even have loved—find them to be very ridiculous, or upsetting, yet you’d rather not let them know.”

Hands began to shoot up, but some paused and retracted in consideration. The flushed owners of the four remaining hands beamed conspiratorially at the speaker.

The speaker began to laugh.

April said, “I suppose I should introduce all of you to another of my family members. Sigh, if you could mature for one moment—”

Sigh saluted. “Please to meet you. I’m happy to see to see that my sister has such fine-looking friends.”

“My brother is very chivalrous,” spoke April. “He will make it a point to be likable, at first. You are all lucky he does not know you; he is not kind to people after he knows them.”

“That’s not very fair,” pouted her brother. “After all, how is one to know what is wrong with someone until you get to know them?”

April made a serious look. “My friends are all good people, who inspire me in thought and conversation.”

“Very well, very good. But what if I found out something bad about them?”



"Are you really unkind?" asked a brunette, with difficulty.

"Not yet," Sigh answered, winking.

She smiled dully, and raised her cup.

"Chivalry is bogus."

"How so?" queried Sigh, scanning the remaining faces.

The man who'd spoken gazed into his cup. "Women don't deserve blanket approval for every stupid thing. Now that they're allowed to have opinions, how is anyone supposed to tell them they're wrong?"

A woman with her legs stretched out across from him glared. "You don't have to, don't worry."

"We don't want your blanket approval," said someone else. "We just want you to love us."

"Speak for yourself," said Theresa.

"What if there's nothing to love?" pressed Sigh.

The game continued. Someone laughed; someone sniffed; the pressure to astound seemed confusingly mixed with a pressure to confess. Like novice players who, in the course of placing a few bets, have suddenly turned into religious gamblers, each question's throw was attended to with a greedy prognostication, eyes rolling about the séance for the revelation of the number.

"Lucy?" April prompted.

Lucy started. Without speaking, she held out her thin arms, her eyes bouncing at each of their hands.

"I don't believe you!" she hissed.

Then her blue form sprang up and darted out of the room.

Kyle stood. But Sigh had already followed her out.

The group looked at Kyle.

"There's nothing to fear from us," he said.

He sat down. Remembered it was his turn.

April looked at him.

"How many people have dated someone for five months without ever holding their hand?"

Silence. Then:

"Do you mean like, as a little kid?"

"That's not dating, really."

"Why not, if it's monogamous," laughed someone else.

"Not as a kid. Now," spoke Kyle.

That ended the reflecting, and no one's hands went up.

"I wish I had. It's kind of sweet," said a woman.

Sigh returned, nodded at his sister, and took his place on the carpet. The questions continued. Then, with a sudden clearness of throat, as if new bells had been fixed there, Elizabeth's voice rang strongly, undeniably:

"How many of you have made people who are married interested in you?"

Yet, unbelievable...

April gave orders for a new variant. When the next person had asked her question, she blushed, then walked around three pairs of outstretched hands until she reached Sigh. She crouched in her white slippers and kissed him.

The next questioner avoided a coupling by kissing April unabashedly. A pair of men were seemingly forced to kiss each other. The newly evolved game, between delighted shouts and sweet scents, began to connect everyone with a hazy series of lines. On April's turn, which had been long anticipated, she asked how many of them, when younger, had parents who had thrown them out (or would have liked to, she added) because of their choice of lover. Kyle seemed to hear the question only after he saw the hands go up. The group shouted for her to pick her favorite. She kissed someone close to him, languidly.

Kyle's turn. He asked an absolutely boring question—who had broken off a relationship before?—then looked around the room at the unprecedented answer: everyone's hand was up. Was this his own great chance to influence someone?

"Free choice!" people shouted.

He put his bottle down carefully, and walked left until he reached the sofa. As he leaned, April's lips pressed his with greeting, and with some kind of automatic motion he found his hands in her hair.

"We should have a contest for best kiss," suggested a girl.

"That's stupid," said Elizabeth.

Everyone looked at her. She did not say anything else.

"Or not..." said the first, offended.

"She's right. Let's not make it more difficult than it is," said Sigh.

"Difficult for you?" laughed the girl who had chosen to kiss him.

"Who's next?" shouted a girl.

Her other arm was being held by her boyfriend, in whose lap she was sitting. "Please don't yell in my ear," he said.

"Why not?" she asked. "Wooo!"

The front of his hand strong-armed her face as he whispered. Her eyes refocused between his fingers; she nodded.



When it was her turn, Elizabeth asked how many had once put aside something of great value to help their partner in a time of need. Nine women, Art, and then Sigh raised their hands; she seemed surprised.

Elizabeth hesitated. Then she walked to Sigh, who was sitting only a few places to her right. She leaned over, hands behind her back, and from that postal position he met her as if she was delivering something of importance. He watched her leave.

When it was his turn and the hands went up, Sigh moved clockwise. He stopped crouched behind Elizabeth and she turned, startled, and he kissed her in one quick motion.

“Oooh, that’s twice.”

“Is that all she gets!”

Kyle took his bottle and approached Elizabeth.

“Forget-me-nots? What lovely flowers!”

She turned to him. April was occupied with another guest that had stumbled in and left the door open; a few of the group began standing, one by one their heads bending away in conversation to someone close by, like a well-organized Hydra.

Kyle glanced out the door. “Some people seem to be leaving.”

Her smile played out, “But we’re not.”

Then it remained, an empty thought.

“So you’re enjoying yourself?” he asked. A stale smell had generated in the closed room.

“Of course.”

“Great.” He looked at the strange, bluish liquid in her glass. “What’s that?”

“I’m not sure.”

Kyle touched his hair.

“Well... you’re certainly at attention, aren’t you?”

Crimsoning, he mumbled, “Let me know if you need anything,” and walked away.

Ethriam Cash Brammer

Red Fruit Reflections

A girl's song rocks a pack beneath her stomach bend humming a spanish lullaby, te cu ru cú y cú y cú, oscillating shoulders where words are forgotten in vines growing long white hairs wrapping around her hands busily snatch, cut, and stuff, snatch, cut, and stuff, snatch, cut, and stuff into canvass sacks, the morning sun just peeks over the eastern chocolates, but noontime heat already hammers down like a fiery fist against her red-stained cheeks as the shadows stop short of relief, short of the rows walked by so many braceros like herself, but palm trees shade the field's edge where an old woman tries to corral tiny children with her one good arm, ven pa'cá tú ven pa'cá, as an empty sleeve sways at her side like wet washing in the wind, the farmer said he never saw her when he started the tractor engine roar, never saw her as the tires started turning, as the belts and pulleys grabbed her sleeve and started to suck her in, he never heard her screaming as he plowed her body across the field, red water sprinkler-head tear ending the old woman's days picking tomatoes in the fields,

but it all seems for the best now for the kids to be cared for by such an experienced mother, who raised twelve criaturas of her own, along side dozens of new bundles left at her wizened feet on the ditch bank each and every day, the girl looks down at her own pouch feeling a tiny bite at her breast where starving infant lips search sweat and shirt for familiar nipple sweet, but he finds only dirt and cries to fill his newborn mouth, shut that kid up, the foreman's shouts burn like juices on her fingertips eaten raw by tomato acid, but you can't wear the gloves they give you, a woman once told her, 'cause you lose your sense of touch, under layers of sandstone hard leather which bruise fruit while guarding fingers from the blade, and you know you can't send bruised fruit to the scales you won't get paid oh they'll take the good ones alright but they still won't pay you 'cause of the mess you made with all of the other ones I remember a young girl bonita y chaparrita como tú I remember she worked a whole week without pay just 'cause she wouldn't take her gloves off take it from me mijita we've all had to learn the hard way,



but it all itches so much, sweat turns to salt like water evaporating on a hot iron skillet, tiny hairs find their way into pores, sore, into her nose, where a frozen sneeze hardens in layers of dust-coated mocos, and once pleasant smells of fresh-cut grass no sours to hay-fever after hours of snatch, cut, and stuff, snatch, cut, and stuff, snatch, cut, and the sling over her back keeps her child close, but his cries wear on their ears, i said shut that kid up, bitter bites itch at reddened breasts like tears burning behind brown eyes without a free arm to scratch, without a free moment to feed, as her song fails to fill hungry baby cries, goddamn it, the foreman's shadow stands on top of her flaquita frame as he shouts, i told you to shut that damn runt up, his hands reach around her wearied neck pulling against a mother's face gone mad, with fear, mad with sun, mad with rage, i'm jus' gonna set it over there, the foreman points to the playground shade where the older children play with sticks and gopher-hole snakes, where an old woman gives chase with her one good arm and they all run away,

she loosens her hug slowly as he lifts the pouch from her back and her sun-baked fear is fanned by sudden relief, she breathes freely for a moment, then, get back to work, the foreman's voice pushes her face into the dirt, marching over stooped campesino backs on his way back to the edge of the shady ditch bank, and he continues to bark orders over the baby's screams now redoubled in the hard arms of a man who holds children in a noose-like grip at his side, pinned like a piglet between his hairy white forearm and spear-point bony hip, the baby squeals when pierced in the side and the foreman brings him up to his face and looks him right in the eyes, now tight with cries, shut up i said, he growls over more squealing and crying, which caused him to deviate from his previous course, and he turns the corner behind a field-side tool-shed where he holds the baby up by his tiny bound feet, his arms stretched out to his sides, up-side-down, suspended above an oil-barrel drum filled with water for all of the braceros to drink, where a baby is silenced in the angry reflections floating on the rainbow-water edge,

and she feels guilty at first, realizing that she can work twice as fast, breathe twice as deeply, without a child dragging at her feet, but when she looks to the side, to the shadow, to see that her baby is not being cradled in the old woman's one good arm, she begins to worry, until the foreman returns, his boots are all she can see when he replaces the torn tarpaulin sling around her neck, bending her back under the yoke of his voice once again, i don't wanna hear one more peep out of that creature you understand me, and her scorched-earth silence says that she does, the foreman waits for a second, watching her, snatch, cut, and stuff, snatch, cut, and when he leaves, she is shocked to find her baby so quiet at her belly, no longer searching for mother's milk, no longer squirming like a littler of blind pups, no longer crying into the ears of all of the campesinos in the field, he's quiet, motionless, as if he has finally been fed, but she continues to sing, te cu ru cú y cú y cú pobrecito tecolote ya se cansa de llorar, spanish lullabies forgotten in red fruit reflections as her little baby grows heavy in a canvas sack.



Jeremiah W. E. Brennan

Humankind's Lake

Permanent hearty health proceeds dead skin cells
With wait like waters deep depth pride
Among the cautious Christian way
The disguise of decency
Pretending the potions of pastures pale prime
Ridicule the night abandoned red barns
Brittle brains conversing on the way
Dancing in the light of inspiration
Whoreless skin soaks
Ethnic pain like white loneliness
Crystallized arm pits of wars the delicate fire
Burned slowly again with grains of dust
Seated highly above trusted portions of night
The forest creaked alone its wide swaying pines made sound
waves communicating
majestically she wiped her tears with bark then climbed aboard
the ship
He torn cloths dirty like New Orleans
Became too much to carry they soon floated way
From the boat
While she slept naked it moved on the silver water
She dreamt she was dying
She dreamt she was sick
She dreamt she was rich
She dreamt she had drowned in the lake

Camincha

The Diet

*This is a country where some people diet
and others starve.*

—Robert Kennedy

Saturday, May 24, 1986
7 lbs to trash/destroy/burn

These thoughts are depressing. Need to sort it all out. Started during those fabulous parties between Thanksgiving and New Year's. Lose three pounds, gain them back faster each time. One good evening meal. Next morning they were laughing up at me from the floor scale. And too much bread. Too many sweets to compensate for arrogant, autocratic teachers who drove me bananas. Stress from working to earn my M.A. in Spanish literature, working as T.A., as interpreter-translator. Not finding suitable roommates, I overate. Compensating for the uninteresting men I meet. Breaking up with Larry. I overate. But vacation is here. Enjoy.

Nine in the morning! I dozed off. Rested now and hungry. Eggs over easy, fried sausages, pancakes, *café au lait*.

I sit in my kitchen eating 4 tbs bran, 1 cup nonfat, ½ a banana. Warmed milk to the boiling point. In the mornings in Pacifica the warmer the better. Mixed it. Chewed it slowly counting to thirty-seven with each mouthful. Learned it from Giorgio who was into Tai Chi and told me, one thing you learn from practicing that ancient Oriental philosophy, for good digestion chew very slowly.

We had fun practicing at dinner, then I found out he practiced his Oriental philosophy while making love also. Always something, drives me to overeating.

Sunday, May 25, 1986
Managed to lose a pound yesterday! 6 to go!

Focusing on food I notice IT more and more. Smells, colors, shapes. This afternoon on my way to practice French—or will forget what we

learned—to meet my group from *Le Circle Français* at *Señor Picaro* getting off Bart on 16th St., it was the delicious smell of *refritos y carnisas* from the corner restaurant. The woman sitting on a side fence feeding her baby. Her breast the size of a full-grown cantaloupe. And the baby's loud and joyous sucking sucking.

At *Señor Picaro*, food, food, food but keeping to my diet had only The Usual, a cup of *café au lait* and kept my mouth busy practicing French. Then we all went across town to the Gateway to see *Sans loir, sans droit*, The Vagabond. My group had thought it was a *joli* film. Not so, Mona the girl in the film, was starving most of the time. Always begging for food and at the end not getting any.

I checked the answering machine. Larry's voice, can we patch it up ...? I'm exhausted, will think about it tomorrow. I eat one cookie. A totally empty stomach keeps me awake. These cookies are exactly, 2 ½" by 1".

Monday, May 26, 1986

Lost another pound! 5 to go.

I'm hungry, Oh! brushing my teeth the mirror tells me my face looks thinner already. Maybe it won't be so difficult. But after my shower the mirror tells me...work on your stomach, make flat again. Waistline, take away couple inches. But my thighs are firm and velvety. I run my fingers feeling them... caressing them... I lie on my still unmade bed... Larry likes my thighs... uhmmm...

After a meager health-calorie-conscious breakfast started to work on the yard and the abundant weeds reminded me of an article on recipes for BOILED DANDELION CROWNS, WILD MINT and WATERCRESS SALAD, ROASTED ROOTS.

Tina called, she's coming tonight. We met at guitar class. Not everyone likes her. She talks too much for some. Is quite a switch, she talks more than me. I like that, I can relax and just listen for a change.

Tina arrived almost on time, totally unlike her. And tall and skinny Tina told me she is on a diet. Has joined some expensive Health Club. I got worried for she's just quit a high paying job as Senior Projects Analyst and her financial situation is very shaky.

We practiced most of the songs we know. I suggested a break. Tina's voice took a very serious tone: I don't know if I can make it through the summer. My grocery bill is humongous. Arny—her teenage son—eats for four.

But she's joined the expensive Health Club!! Tina went on: they count your fat percent. It is very important to TRIM DOWN MY IMAGE. Nowadays, more important than to BUILD UP MY IMAGE. And that's what this Health Club offers me.

You look very trim to me, Tina.

But I am NOT. Tina's face contracted in pain. Her eyes opened wide she searched for the proper words through the room. Stopped. She found them: I CAN'T WEAR SLACKS. MY THIGHS ARE PURE FAT.

Tina is crazy! I savored one cookie and fixed myself a cup of *café au lait*. No sugar. No honey. Tina turned down my delicious cookies, they have a high level of fat percent, she said. Come on woman, live a little, I say.

Tuesday, May 27, 1986

4 lbs to go. All right!

8a The mirror tells me the layers of fat from my face keep peeling away.

4 tbs bran ½ a banana ¾ nonfat ½ cup *café au lait*

No vacation from my interpreting work. Have a deposition. Packed a lunch of 6 tbs rice, ½ a banana cooked for a minute in the microwave. 2 thin slices of pound cake, handful of almonds. Thermos with *café au lait*.

Focusing on food I noticed the law office was of the "bones and rags" variety. Nobody offers you coffee—had to insist on getting a glass of water. Sparse, old furniture, nobody smiles. Depo finished. Didn't ask if there was a lunchroom, would probably charge me to use it. Before leaving the building went in the bathroom. I'm not crazy about eating in bathrooms. But was famished. It was clean. No odors. I attacked the pound cake. The two tiny, thin slices tasted delicious. Poured myself some *café au lait*. Rushed to my next assignment.

This law office was absolutely splendid located in the Pyramid, my favorite San Francisco building. In its lobby on exhibit were beautiful—they looked edible—carved gourds. The suite I was working at had an enormous lobby with an unending view of San Francisco, the Pacific, Angel Island, Tiburon, Sausalito, Golden Gate Bridge. And as soon as I introduced myself the receptionist asked me: How do you like your coffee?

Next, interpreting at a medical examination. The suite small, no views, no coffee. Usually doctors don't serve any.

Once though a doctor produced a cup just to get me out of the examining room. Him and the lady patient understood each other perfectly. He ran his hands through her body and lady patient squirmed and giggled like a teenager making out on her first date. The doctor's cheeks redder and redder, his eyes moist, lower lip shaking. Then he remembered me, the interpreter, jumped off the lady patient, took me by one elbow, walked me into the hallway where he told his assistance, serve her a cup of coffee, please. And to me, ah! uhm! don't need an interpreter. Thank you.

This evening I went to meet Eva. Haven't seen each other in a while. Got off at Market and Castro. Damned! Where did Eva say we are meeting, *Cocolat*?

I walked a few paces on Church away from Market and asked a pair of one way glasses who bent over solicitous and interested, *Cocolot*?

Yes, or something like that.

This way at the end of the building, he said.

That was a tiny store choking with chocolates. No. Damn! What did Eva say? So I walked a little more on Church. *Just Desserts* stared at me.

Dared me. Tried to seduce me. Huge strawberries stuck out their tongues at me, red, moist while swaying on oceans of whipped cream next to almonds, nuts, coconut gratings and oceans of chocolate sauce and vanilla custard.

I'LL SHOW THEM. And holding on to the memory of those layers of fat peeling from my face I entered.

So I ordered a SMALL chocolate. No whipped cream.

\$1.35...I siphoned it.

At the next tiny table a party was going on with parents grouped around it, their children running all over, their clothes smeared with more strawberries, whipped cream, coconuts, almonds, walnuts than they could eat even if they stayed there all night. Obviously they weren't thinking of all the hungry children in the world. When I was little I was reminded almost daily that they were in China. One child of about five screams louder than the others. Her mother places another pastry in the child's mouth.

Wednesday, May 28, 1986

3 lbs to go.

I looked in the mirror, my dimples! Had forgotten I had them. And my clothes hang better. Making progress. Stress free days help. I'll continue to skip dinner.

Had lots of phone calls. Carmela, the Chicana activist will come over tomorrow night. We want to get together before she leaves to help harvest coffee crops in Nicaragua.

Carmela suggested we go out to eat. I didn't say no, don't want to hear: **YOU DON'T NEED TO LOSE ANY WEIGHT.**

Clara also called. We are getting together next Thursday evening. She is into advancing her spirituality with exercises, classes. But I'm concerned about her living with Bob, twenty years older than her, boring, unkept, paunchy, bald, 'cause she runs—her own expression—after him, like a jealous teenager. This amazes Bob who watches with wide eyes and parted lips: **IS SHE RUNNING, REALLY, AFTER ME? WHY?**

That's what I said too, why?

I want security, she said.

With Clara there won't be any eating. She told me with great zest she is on a strict diet, the people in the office bring out their vegetables and we all eat together.

At six I'll leave for guitar class. If I arrive at Burlingame Rec too early I'll sit in the car reading *How to Slice Inches from Your Waistline*.

Thursday, May 29, 1986

3 lbs to go. Progress! My clothes fit me.

4 tbs bran ½ a banana ¾ cup milk

I chew slowly, count to 37 with each mouthful.

Relationships. I'm seriously considering calling Larry today. Maybe today we'll patch it up.

After housework, I'll start work on the translation that's due next week from DEL MONTE Corp. All about peaches.

About three, Diane dropped by. I don't like her. Came to apologize, I did the right thing asking her to move out. This delights me as in delights to the palate. My mind strays to food when under stress.

Offered Diane a cup of, tea? Gingerly. Not as in ginger cookies. But as in nervously, for I never know what kind of diet she is on. Sometimes Diane'll eat all kinds of impure things while swearing loyalty to bean sprouts and soy milk.

Diane declined. I've been invited to dinner next door, I better be going.

I made myself a *café au lait* with Sweet and Low. And got back to my peaches.

Friday, May 30, 1986
2 lbs to go. Wonderful.

I'm closer to my goal than I've been in a long time. And found a couple of messages of possible roommates. Dating begins to sound good too. Will date others before calling Larry. First I'll work at better profile, better fitting clothes, firmer flesh. Last night I admired myself long and hard in the mirror, caressed my thighs thinking of Larry. Now I have to go to work. Another law office.

Walking downtown I am aware of the contrasts. Beggars, plush department store windows, elegant people. Beggars. Old woman sitting on the sidewalk leaning her back against the grey cement wall of Macy's. Hand outstretched, back of head reached just to the edge of store window where a table shone exquisitely set: lace table cloth, sterling silver, crystal, fresh flowers, a bottle of wine in a silver cooler. Beggars.

My assignment over. At home I'm taking a nap 'cause I'm going out tonight. At nine Tessa will pick me up. She's quite bossy if I'm not ready she'll give me a sermon. Her good side, always ready to go dancing. We are going to *Señor Pepe* in Foster City and will meet friends there. I'll order The Usual, willn't touch the chips and hot sauce. I know if I taste one I'll not be able to stop.

Saturday, May 31, 1986
0 lbs to go. I did it!!

It must've been all that dancing last night and sticking to The Usual. I'm hungry. The small portions are taking their toll on me. I'm hungry.

But even before I eat, need to write this: Met this fabulous guy, Dan. We danced all night. Talked about our lives. We felt close to one another. I felt like going home with him for passionate love making. I've heard it's very good for losing weight. But Tessa and I made a pact long ago, we go out together, we come back together. She is happy for me. I have a dinner date with Dan tomorrow night.

Will have to be careful with that dinner though. Don't want to gain all seven pounds back at one sitting. It happens that way to me. Isn't that something? A dinner date, a problem! Something to worry about. What a mess! Have to plan this dinner, what I'll eat. Have to be careful. But don't know what restaurant we are going to. Will the servings be very large?! I have to be careful. I don't believe it, a dinner date a problem? This is depressing...

Nancy Caronia

The Dream

This is a dream.

My brother eats children. My brother picks children up in playgrounds alone walking home from school, on their way to dinner. He charms them with a grin, a piece of candy, promises of a Mr. Softee ice cream cone with chocolate sprinkles. His eyes full of fun, the children are blind to the deception knocking at their door. My brother takes these children. Makes them cry. He hurts them. Touches their still baby soft skin roughly, fills their orifices with his fluid. Fills their body with his cum. This is a dream. I said that already. Say it again. Say it over and over again. This is a dream. He is my brother and this is just a dream. When he is finished with their innocence he cuts them. He cuts them like roast beef. Cooks them up roasts or bakes or barbecues them. This is a dream I have a lot. He eats them. Good to the last drop.

This is not a dream. But it is a nightmare.

My brother has a bruise on his buttocks where my father pulled his diaper down in fun. Picked him up bit him on the butt. My brother cried. Grandma Veduta said, "What's a matta wid you. Be a man." There are teeth marks on my brother. He is marked. He is a marked boy. I try to grab for him. My father laughs like king of the jungle holds him over his head. Out of reach. My brother is screaming for Mommy. His eyes are red, he is crying. "What a baby. What a crybaby ya are. Can't have any fun," my father says to him. Hands him over to my mother, calls him a momma's boy. He is wrong. My brother is his. The holy ghost. He is the holy ghost. My sister is the son.

Another nightmare.

My father sits at the head of the table. He is the king of the castle. The one that owns the four bedroom colonial nightmare we're supposed to call home. He sits, fork in one hand, knife in the other. The right hand sits the son. No, wrong. But it's true. My sister, a dyke in the making, does that count? My sister sits at the right hand of the father, the holy ghost is his son. I am nothing in this picture as he cuts roast beef. Gives pieces of it to each of us. Drips blood for gravy over our portions of food. My mother heaps out spoonfuls of mashed potatoes. He sits at the head of the table. Cuts his roast beef. Shoves it in his mouth. The gravy drips down his chin. Drips blood he wipes with a paper napkin. The blue paper napkin I placed

so carefully at his place at the table. My mother gets up from the table to grab more napkins. She runs every few moments for something he wants. Never sits down to eat. Good thing she doesn't like food. Another beer, more napkins, the butter, a clean glass. "Dammit Maeve, sit down for a second," he snaps over the edge of his beer glass. He turns to yell at us for being so sloppy. For being so like him. For being him.

And yet another nightmare.

Mommy cries on the sofa, points to where I make pee-pee, "Soon you'll be a woman. You'll bleed from there." And my brain is scrambled eggs. I am an egg and I'm scrambled. Blood. I'm gonna die. No, nono. "Mommy don't cry. I'm not gonna bleed. I'm not gonna die." She wipes her eyes. "We all do it," she says. "It's our curse. We all do it. And so will you." I stare at her. Try not to leave the room. The blood takes up everything. The blood is always so important. She is crying as she tells me I'm going to be a woman. But I am only nine. This is when I stop growing. Will myself to stay a little girl. Maybe she cries because she knows. It's not the beginning. It's the end. She knows something different. I forget. But I never faint. I dip away from time. The world fades away. Plunges from view. But I'm not a fainter. I fall down the bottomless pit of memory. I think. I think I know it all.

I thought this was a dream.

My father comes in the doorway, looking out into the kitchen. The kitchen where I'm checking in the fridge. It's 7:00 a.m. Getting ready for school. Getting ready to catch the bus. I'm not feeling well. Dizzy. I look up and he's there. I feel faint. But I don't faint. I'm not a fainter. I am not this way. I remember everything. Only I slip down. I slip and slide down the refrigerator when I see the doorway. Not the doorway. Him. The father. Five o'clock shadow looms large at 7:00 a.m. Electric razor in his hand, beginning the ritual of cleaning himself up. No ape hairs to show through at work. His rug of a chest bear of a back hidden from the world by white button down shirts, wide blue ties and wool suit jackets. But I know it's there. I have intimate knowledge of its existence. I see him, grey undershirt and jockey shorts. Small blue triangles, huge shorts, shit stains that won't come out in the wash. My mother does cold washes, never washes anything in hot. Doesn't believe in bleach. Hot water. Costs extra money. Money we don't have. So she says. So he complains. But money is always ready for cigarettes and OTB. Money always available for his Quinlan pretzels, her Wise potato chips. He is looming in front of me. Looking at me with concern? Could it be that? Yes. He says, "What's wrong? Yer white as a ghost." I don't know I say out loud to myself. My head aches. It aches. Back where the cerebellum connects to the brain. My brain says forget. To live in this

house just forget. Forget it now. Forget it all. I say, "I don't feel good. I think I'm gonna faint." My body is clammy, cold, I feel terror grip my body in the clamminess of my skin. I slam the refrigerator door. Orange juice forgotten in the shadow of him. I feel myself slide, start to slip away. He lunges forward, picks me up before I hit the linoleum in the kitchen. The one my mother asked for special. My father said, "We've already spent too much." But she didn't want to move so he gave it to her as a peace offering, a way to keep her trap shut. He keeps me from falling onto peach and maize and salmon mosaic tiles. Keeps me from falling away from him. Nausea fills me to have him so close. I am dead weight. He puffs as he lifts. His hands in my armpits should tickle, but I scream. Inside, my cells are screaming. Not voice. No voice. I am quiet. The demons only in my head. No one else knows. No one else hears. He carries me to the sink a foot away. Turns on the cold water. Says, "Geez, you're like ice" and I'm sweating. Sweating from my forehead now like a fountain in the Piazza Navona.

Years later. The Piazza Navona is years later. Naked statues, naked men. Now and at the hour of our death. Amen. I run my hands under the cold water. I place my wrists under the running faucet and try to concentrate as the cold water forcefully hits my flesh.

I was taught at five to run my hands under cold water by angels. I was flirting with Peter Bell. Five years old. We smiled and made faces at each other from across the table we shared in kindergarten. Being silly. Having fun. But it's school. I wasn't listening to how to make twos. The number two. My fault. Didn't pay attention. Big lines on paper, fat red pencil with black lead running through the middle. I raised my hand, "Where do I put the twos?" Batted my long eyelashes at Peter. Auntie Ida, my favorite aunt, Always says, "Lily, yer gonna be a movie star with those eyelashes." Peter laughed. I smiled my movie star smile at him. I have to practice. Teacher, black hair, black eyes, black-rimmed glasses, green neon dress is next to me in a flash. Screams, "Don't you listen, don't you ever listen?" She smacks the back of my head. Smacks me hard. I scream out, "No. No, I'll do it. I know what to do." She's on fire. Her heat smacks me again and again. I start to wet my pants. "I gotta go to the bathroom," I yell. "Liar," she yells back. "I've got to go. Really. I'm not lying," I whimper. She picks me up by the left wrist drags me across the floor, feet barely touch the ground, throws me out the room. Slams the door behind me. I am alone. With the echo. Alone in the hall. I run across black and green tiles to the girls' room. Step on all the cracks. Break my mother's back. Open the big grey metal door. Stand looking at stalls. It's too late. I lock myself in a stall, clean me up best I can. See my white tights. I know they'll have to dry on their own. I won't

tell Mommy, she'll tell me it serves me right. Tell me I'm a liar, that I made it all up. I make up stories all the time. That's what Mommy says.

The dogs of Ceres guard my gates of hell. Don't get too close or I'll spew all my history onto you. I must remain vigilant to those secrets that keep my life like glue in my ribs exactly as it is.

My father whispers, "You must have a fever." One hand on the small of my back. The other feeling my forehead. "Yeah, I must have the flu. I don't think I can go to school today," I answer and fade away again. Feel the black stars coming on around me. His smell. His smell overtakes me.

I hear voices in the girls' room. I walk from the stall to the sink without looking up. I start to shake when the water faucet won't work. The faucet won't stay down. No water comes out. I can't press hard enough on the water faucet. I start to sob. Walk around in a circle, make my hands into fists that I push at the air in front of me. I want to wash my hands. Get the smell off me. I'm supposed to be clean. Be a good Catholic girl. Can't ever be dirty. What would the doctors at the hospital say? Two big girls appear at my side. It must be their voices I heard, but I don't know who they are. I've never seen them in school before. Maybe they're angels. Maybe god sent angels to help me. To teach me how to not cry. Maybe I'm a saint. A martyr. When is the crucifixion? Mary the Virgin Mother and Gabriel the angel come to me and they see the tears running down my cheeks. They say, "Hey, you alright?" I just stare at them. Don't say a word. The angels in plaid jumpers stand on either side and carry me back to the sink. I am floating on angel wings. They press the cold water down. Pick my arms up. Each angel has one of my arms in their care, not there, just barely. They gently put my wrists under cold water. Bring me back. "Go ahead hold it there. You'll feel better." The blond angel smiles at me. Mary, she must be Mary. "How old are you?" Mary asks. "Five," I whisper. Am brave, tell Mary I'd like to use the soap. They let go my arms. Reach up to press the soap dispenser. White liquid falls into the palm of my hand. Make a big lather, rub my hands gently. Rub my hands for awhile. They say in unison, like a chorus of angels, "You gonna be alright?" I nod my head up and down for them. "Okay, we're going now. We've gotta go back to class," Mary tells me. I look up at Mary, don't say a word. Look back down into the sink. Let the soap fall away in the water. Mary and Gabriel are gone. I don't hear the door close behind them. Maybe they walked through. Angels can do that. Put my hands under the heat lamp to dry. Pull hands down. Watch the light, the heat turn on and off as I raise and lower my hands quickly. I wait in the girls' room, playing with the heat lamp, a long time. I don't want to go back to the classroom. Do my twos. Don't want to talk. Don't want to anything. Finally, I step out of the girls room and am caught in the

bright fluorescent glare of the hall. See the black and green tiles between me and kindergarten. I decide I can only step on the green tiles. No black tiles. And no stepping on the cracks. I walk slowly. Playing checkers with myself. Walking a path around, away from the door. Away and away. Bang zoom to the moon Alice to the moon Maeve. What my father say to my mother.

My father is calling me, "Are you alright? Lily, are you alright?" He's shaking me. I make the effort to look at him, "I don't think I can go to school. I don't think I'm gonna make it." "No, go back to bed. I'll tell yer mother," he says before he goes back to the bathroom to finish his shave leaving me alone at the kitchen sink, staring at the cool water hitting my wrists.

This is part of the dream.

My crazy friend Frank, shiny bald pate Frank, tattoo a sight on the back of his head if they're gonna kill him he wants them to get it right the first time, he is left of left but he wants them to get it right, hands me the New York Post. Points to a photo of my brother. John's in custody. Head down. Wearing a white button down shirt I remember from graduation—his high school my college. We're four years apart. Four years. I look at Frank. Frank looks out sideways. It would be too much for him to look straight on. Too much. He does it once a month, maybe twice if he feels really good. He takes the meeting of our eyes very seriously. So do I. He carries it with him for long periods of time. So do I. It sustains him as if he is still in the war, still fighting in the jungle. Me too. I accept all this as our condition of knowing. As a condition of love because that is what I feel for Frank though I do not tell him. Though he does or does not know. He looks out the corner of his eye, eyebrows raised waiting for a word, a sound, an utterance springing forth through lips holding white teeth straightened with...*not my money*. I feel myself falling through a black hole. I try to stop the descent, but my chest pounds too hard. I am having trouble breathing. Frank calls to me through the void. I meet his voice with my gaze, my gaze tells him, this is my brother. The photo on the cover of the New York Post is my brother. There is no sound. Only a silent enunciation. Frank hears me. His eyes fill with sadness. My brother has been caught. Caught dead to rights. Blood of a baby on his lips. Blood of someone's son on his tongue. He fills his mouth with their fluids, their body after he fills them up he eats. I look at Frank. I look at the paper. My hands tremble. My eyes are a blank. I see white before me. I gasp out, "Please, let hold your hand. Please." I surprise myself. I know it is a lot to ask of this man who shaves his head bald the better to see he is a target. He places his hand in mine. I hold on tight. I hold on for my life.

This is the nightmare.

My brother is my father. The father son and holy ghost. Where is the mother? The daughter? Sitting high in a castle chaste until the day they die.

I try to wake up but my body does not listen. I am paralyzed in my bed. Frozen solid. Frozen still. I try to wake up, to get away from the blood. To get away from my father who appears as the son. Who is the brother in all the dreams I have these days.

My father eats children. He is a cannibal breakfasting on babies, sandwiching toddlers for lunch, adolescent hors d'oeuvres before dinner. I am his midnight snack. This is not a dream.

He walks, pads lightly in his black felt slippers across tile floor, black tiles, 12 inches x 12 inches, square areas to cross a bedroom floor I'm sure he steps on cracks. I sleep. I never sleep. No lock. No lock out. He is the king, the father, the son, the holy ghost, there is no mother, no daughter, only property. Only pieces of his property owned throughout time. I am his blood. His blood is in my mouth. His cum is in my hole. Whole am I from this man, this father, where is the mother? Blood in my mouth as I hear footsteps across the hall. The door opens a sliver of light falls across my body, blue baby dolls cover my sweet flesh. Snuck upon when the sandman has already stopped by. When dreamland takes over. When I wake up tasting blood. My mouth full of blood. My body paralyzed with fear. With his body over mine. I reach out but my hand doesn't move. My arm is pins and needles. Starts at the tips of my fingers. Makes way to my heart. It's the blood pumping through my body. I am in the jungle I hear the drums in my ears. Blood pounding an ancient song reminds. We are the eaten. Bits and pieces out of us. Till only our flesh remains.

I sleep never. I sleep no more forever. Childhood as a midnight snack when the woman, your wife, your property is too tired. I am the snack. Just a taste, a sliver, a slice, a piece of ass. No sound. The sound falls down the pit of blackness. Once innocence. Now. Nothing. I slip I fall I do not wake. I feel pins and needles in my fingertips crawling up my arms. Crawling to shoulders down belly feel nothing. Feel nothing. I do not hear anything but sounds of traffic, cars moving slowly by at 3:00 a.m. past my bedroom window. Tail lights reflect off panes of glass that I fly out. Reach for the stars with my fingertips. Hope to catch hold of the moon. Catch hold of a tree top before the moon. For years I will not get back. Blackness where the clear light of childhood should be. I wonder where are the locks? So I put locks on this not so innocent heart.

I'll wonder why I'm not in an asylum, a drug addict or a drunk. A prostitute on 42nd Street. How could I have turned out so normal if it was

that crazy at home. But I stand on the rocks. Look out to the sea. Fu Zhang, the Chinese herbalist on Lafayette Street, takes my pulses. I see him for the rash on the right side of my neck, the discoloration on my right shoulder. I didn't know what it was from, but wanted it fixed before I left for my island, the motherland of my father. Fu Zhang looked deeply in my eyes and held my wrists with his fingertips. Gently touched my pulses. I see his eyes past wire rims. Wire rims that listen. Eyes that name. He speaks few words in English. "Stick out tongue." I do as he says. "Okay, put tongue back." He lets go my wrists. He looks at me. I see a white mask which covers his nose and mouth. This mask protects him from the herbs overflowing out of brown wooden boxes in his office. The space we sit in is filled with stacks of boxes and him. And a chair for me to sit on. He looks deeply in my eyes. I came for a rash I want to shout. Fu Zhang says, "You are very sad," He repeats it slowly when my eyes fill with tears. "You are very sad. Too much emotion inside. Very bad. We get it out. We get out for you." He gives me herbs. Herbs I need to boil. Bags of herbs that will stink up my apartment and that I'll need to drink three times a day. He gives me a cream for the rash. I smile and say, "Thank you." I give him \$29, his small fee for my visit and the herbs. I shake his soft, small hand, give him a weak smile, I think he smiles at me through his mask and then I leave. I use the cream, the rash is gone in two days. I drink the tea for a week and then stop. I'm not ready to give up my father. I'm not ready to give him up as my father quite yet.

I I I see. There is an eye here. A watchful eye. A waiting eye. I know all that is going on with this eye. Wanting to make the eye an I. I am my father's midnight snack. A bite before bed. A morsel before sleep with my mother. I am a morsel of time, a piece of property. Something to be carted out at work, for the guests, to the neighbors her good grades, her excellent posture, her polite behavior, her helping nature. I am a hot plate dish in my father's banquet of life.

My father eats children. He is a cannibal breakfasting on babies, sandwiching toddlers for lunch, adolescent hors d'oeuvres before dinner. I am his midnight snack.

This is not

This is not a

This is not a dream

this

is

my

life.

Lorie Caval

Untitled

Be strong
Be a mom
Be a lover
Be a fierce survivor
Be a chef and a fucker and a red lip kisser
Be supportive
Be smart
Be rich too, if you figure out how to
Be a strong black, white, mulatto woman with Chinese eyes and
an ass
that won't quit

Then maybe I won't quit you

Be a caresser
And be ready to be caressed
But don't want it
Don't expect it
And most importantly
Don't need it
Because the second you do
I won't have it to give

Because, you see
I've been through so much
My life has been hard
And the television says that you should be strong and beautiful
Like a round-assed girl from the video
You should bring home the bacon and fry it up in the pan

For me

And never-never let me forget I'm a man

I'll stick my dick in you too
Even if you boo hoo

David Cherry

A Blueprint

I think it was the comfort that threw me off. I hadn't listened to music through headphones for a long time, and instantly I was taken back five years. Somewhere near the center of one of those monster accordion buses I sank into an elevated, decent-sized seat, staring out of the windows at the miraculous October colors. The world was subtle, honest, gliding past like water along the sides of a boat. My mind moved along with the trees and the music and the other passengers. We all moved together, beautifully. Maybe it was the music. I had decided to listen to John Coltrane, placing the orange CD into the portable player that I had borrowed from my girlfriend's sister. And it's not that the world seemed new, or fresh, or extraordinary. In fact that's the thing; it seemed completely permanent. I didn't feel that I should change, or begin living my life differently—I felt that I was alive, that the sensation that I had always thought would one day come from progress and completion had actually been the backbone of all of my thinking in the first place.

Then the sax made this deep, guttural groan, and I realized how little I understood about the type of creature that Coltrane must have been. His presence was so clear in the sound, a map of his breath. I was envious of his color, too. He seemed black, and it was meaningful, and it was cool. Dead fucking cool. I had nothing like that. And admitting this struck something within me, humbled me. So I was able to sit, staring out of the windows, relieved. No plans, no expectations. I could never really do more.

The bus then moved down along the river, parallel to it. I looked across the aisle, through the windows that lined the other side of the bus, at the water and the run-down buildings that sat along its edge. This was all right too. The day was overcast, but no rain, just gray-silt air and sky and cloud. It was clear, and though there wasn't the bright, all-knowing golden shine of the sun, the colors burst from the changing leaves, from the passing cars, from the bridges that held themselves above the river like outstretched men, hands planted firmly on one side and feet on the other, unable to move without crashing into the water below.

I caught the man in the seat in front of me noticing the same things. He was in his forties; short black hair, dark brown skin. He wore a khaki Carhart jacket that was hung down off the back of his shoulders, because

of the heat inside the bus. His face, proud and distinguished, took in the world happily, relaxingly. I looked at him and the sound of the music in my ears suited him; they went well together, shook hands even. He had on this plain sweater, which, paired with the look in his eyes, somehow made him seem foreign, interested in the part of the world in which he found himself. It was such a positive sensation to sit, in this state of mind, with this music, and this man, and simply ride along, breathing, feeling no set pace, no pull in the movement of time. Everything was happening, and I could feel it.

In East Liberty, near that fast food joint that only has a drive-thru (no inside dining), the man pulled his tan jacket over his shoulders, catching the collar on his sweater and folding the thing under itself. He struggled to fix it, but no luck, and I fought off the urge to help him, or to tell him that it was messed up. When he stood up to walk to the front of the bus, I realized that the jacket was just the top of a one-piece jumpsuit, like a mechanic might wear, which altered the way I saw him. He seemed even more humble, just getting off work, ready to trudge down the old street toward his home, his couch, his food, his bed. So much dignity as he stepped off, crossing the street, in front of the gas station, busy with people moving and filling their cars with fuel. Maybe a sweet woman peeking through the upstairs curtain was anticipating the sound his keys in the living room doorway, the warm entrance, simple happiness.

I listened to the music and I looked at my world, trying not to temper my feelings, but to pay attention, to see, to relax. The driver took us onto the busway. As another driver waved to ours, I read the sign at the busway entrance:

ATTENTION DRIVERS! NEVER LEAVE YOUR BUS UNATTENDED UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES!

As we turned and began to accelerate, another sign:

TURN YOUR LIGHTS ON.

(I wondered if I would say, Turn on your lights?)

But we're moving faster now, through the inside of a community snaked and hidden along the side of railroad tracks, under bridges, past car yards, and more factories—or the buildings that used to be factories but have been renovated to hold offices and corporation branches—toward the city, and jobs, and more businesses. The saxophone, piano, bass, drums carried me straight through it all, a mellow schematic poem of intelligent tones, encouraging me to feel calm and pensive.

The city was waiting quietly, the buildings large and full, at the command of no one in particular. The weather was even less appealing here: bland with the promise of possible rain still resting in its pocket. I had to

get up as my stop approached, and I tried to make it to the front without using the cord that signals a stop ("STOP REQUESTED," the bus says if you pull it).

"Thank you," I said to the driver.

"All right," he said.

"Have a good night."

"All right," he said.

I had agreed to meet my brother at work so that we could go to dinner together. I walked the four blocks to his building with the music draped across my brain. I stepped off curbs, eyed traffic lights, looked at people hard as they waited for others and buses and food. My back felt strong, tall and light, functional in an easy, deliberate way; it seemed as though it was being guided by fishing line, peacefully sliding toward the surface of something. I stopped to look at my favorite mannequin, a confidently petite girl in the window of Brooks Brothers. She was wearing a new sweater. I crossed the street and entered the front of Chris's building, trying to ignore the headlines on the newspaper boxes as I passed them. The entrance was quiet and I nodded to a gray-haired, clear-eyed guy who was milling about, avoiding any actual work. He should have been cleaning, I think, but I'm pretty sure he was half nuts anyway. The elevator door was closing as I reached it. The woman inside held the door for me absently, flashing her pale fingers past the sensor as if performing a card trick. She stared at my headphones with obvious distaste, pressing the third floor button with a clean, beige fingernail.

"Thanks," I said.

The music, much louder to my ears now than it had been when I was outside, may have been audible to her, though in an altered, airy form that would make it less welcoming. When the door opened, she motioned me off and I obeyed, bowing my head submissively.

I entered my brother's office as his secretary, Kristen, stood up, laughing and smacking a stack of papers on the counter. Her face was flirting red exuberance. I took off the headphones, shoving them into the pocket of my coat.

"Hey, Paul. How are you doing?" she asked.

"I am wonderful," I said. "How are you, Kristen?"

"Tired," she said. "I'm ready to get out of here."

"You're almost there," I said, looking at the clock. "Is Chris back there?"

"You're late," she said. "He said you were going to be here at five-thirty."



"I know," I said. "I'm always late. I just can't get my life in order. I need to slow down, you know?"

"I know what you mean," she said, though I was certain that she didn't.

"All right," I said. "I'm going in."

She smiled and sort of saluted me as I walked past her. The office was filled with paper—stacks, piles, folders, cabinets; eight-and-a-half by eleven, eleven by seventeen, twenty-four/sixty, legal, ledger, cotton-weaved, twenty-four by thirty-six. I ducked my head into Chris's office as I knocked on the open door.

"How does anything ever get done around here?" I asked.

Chris was sitting at his desk with his head in his hands. He looked up at me and smiled.

"You're late," he said.

"I know. I know," I said. "You're the tenth person to tell me. Bring in the hangman, already. What's wrong, anyway?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm just great? Let's get the hell out of here."

He stood up to put on his jacket.

"Is that a new picture?" I asked him, noticing a small, framed color photograph on the wall behind him.

"Yeah," he said. "I just bought it. What do you think?"

"It doesn't seem like something you'd like," I said.

"I know," he said. "It seems like something you'd like."

"You're right," I said. "I like it."

"Did I ever take you on the roof here?" he asked.

"You tried to, once," I said, "but we couldn't get passed a locked door."

"All right," he said. "Today will be perfect."

He led me out of the small room, shutting the light off as we left.

"Goodnight Kristen," he yelled, taking me toward the back exit. "See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight Chris. Goodnight Paul," she called from the front. "Stay out of trouble."

"No problem," Chris shouted back.

He looked at me, shaking his head.

"She always says shit like that," he said.

"But she's cute," I said.

Laughing, he opened the door and led me into the back hallway.

"I guess married men don't notice cute girls anymore," I said, smiling.

“Hey, pal,” he said, pushing the red button marked “up.” “You’re practically married yourself. Wait until I mention to Amy that you think my secretary is cute. She’ll love that.”

“Don’t even joke with her about it,” I said. “She’ll think you’re being serious. It will bother her for a month.”

“I know, I know. I won’t say anything,” he said. “You are so uptight today.”

“I’m not at all, actually. I have to tell you about the ride here,” I said. “I had the most amazing experience.”

“Tell me about it upstairs,” he said, ushering me inside as the elevator door opened.

We took an elevator to the thirty-ninth floor, then climbed three flights of stairs to get to the top of the building. Chris opened an old window (his normal escape plan) and wedged a chair into it to keep it open. We stepped out onto the roof, easing our way toward the edge. The ground was covered in small loose rocks that moved and slid as we walked.

“Why do you think they would cover a roof with pebbles?” I asked.

“Ammunition?” Chris joked.

“That’s not even funny,” I said, carefully looking at the other buildings covered in lights and glass. “You could kill someone.”

“I know. I know,” he said. “I’m only kidding.”

He grabbed a handful of rocks, walked to the edge of the roof, and leaned over. I tried to look over the side as well, but the inside of my palms started to hurt. Chris was eyeing something. He held a single pebble between his thumb and index finger.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, losing interest and turning away. He tossed the rocks back down and reached into his pocket. “But check out these.”

He held out his hand, which was filled with those propeller-looking seeds that fall off the trees this time of year, which we always called helicopters.

“Why do you have those in your pocket?” I asked.

He smiled and gave me a bunch; then taking a step back, he threw the rest as high as he could into the sky. I put my face to the edge of the building. The seeds made a cloud of paraplegic snowflakes: corkscrew ballerinas spinning toward the earth. My foot slipped and the ache in my hands lunged through my arms and arrested my chest as I fell to the ground.

“Are you all right?” he laughed. “That was great.”

“Oh, you liked that,” I said.



"Not you," he clarified. "The helicopters. Look. They're coming down all over the street." He leaned even further over the edge. "Watch out suckers!" he screamed.

"You're amazing," I said. I put my head back and closed my eyes.

"What?" he said. "What's wrong? What?"

"I just need to lie here for a minute," I said.

Chris lay down next to me. The fading city sky looped above us, generations beyond vying for attention. It was just living out its years like anything else, trying to make the best of things.

"Sue left me last night," Chris said, quietly.

"What?" I sat up and looked at him.

"She left," he said. "She took the boys and left."

I thought that my brother and his wife had the perfect marriage, they never fought, never cheated, never worried. Their children were beautiful. Their house was beautiful. Even their goddamn dog was beautiful.

"Well, what happened?" I asked.

"I don't know," he began. "We had this huge fight, out of nowhere, and she flipped out, packed a bag, got the boys out of bed and drove away."

"I don't understand," I said. "What went wrong? What did you do?"

"Nothing," he said. "I mean, it all started with me saying that I was going to quit my job."

"Is that true?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I just said it. I would like to, but I don't know if I could actually do it. When I mentioned the idea, she blew up. She decided to insult me in every way possible. She must have been saving it up for a while, because she pulled out things from months ago."

"That's terrible," I said. "I'm sure it won't last, though. Go home and talk to her about it. She was probably just upset about something else."

"Listen to you," he said. "You've only been in one serious relationship in your whole life."

"Yeah, but we're perfect," I said. "We get along like chocolate and milk."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," he said.

"Stupidest?" I asked.

"That's right," he said. "Stupidest." He sat up, placing his forehead against his knees. "I don't even know what to think anymore," he began. "I used to be so inspired, but now everything seems so dull, and completed. I feel like my life is over, like I have nothing to offer my wife, or my children—or myself."

"What are you talking about?" I asked again.

"I don't know," he said. "It's just that, lately, this feeling has come over me that I have nothing to offer anyone, that my mind is junk. I don't seem to enjoy things the way I used to. Everything seems useless, or uninteresting, or pointless. Remember I used to have ideas all of the time?"

"You still have ideas," I said.

"Not like I used to," he corrected me. "I remember thinking that the world was remarkable. I would walk down the street glowing, talking to strangers, finding something inspiring about practically everything."

"You're in a slump, man, that's all," I said. "I don't think it's anything to worry about. It certainly shouldn't be disrupting your family."

"I know," he admitted. "But I guess it is."

"Go home right now and look through some old pictures," I told him. "Listen to three or four of your favorite records, read your journals from a year ago, take Sue to a movie or something, wrestle with your children. It can't be that difficult to remember why your life is the way that it is. And that feeling should be positive. You have an amazing life. Quit this lousy job if you have to. You'll only be alive for so long. Why would you want to be miserable? Call Mom, she always has a way of making you feel better. That's her function in life."

"But what is my function in life?"

"Give me a break," I said. "I'm supposed to be asking *you* those questions."

"You're right," he said. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I think I'm starting to lose my mind."

"Forget that one, too," I said. "That's also my line."

"You're right," he said again. He put his head in his hands.

"Listen," I said. "If you keep stealing my lines, we won't have anything to talk about." I looked at my watch. "You need to get home, find your gorgeous wife, and set things straight." I threw my fistful of helicopters at him.

He sighed, then looked at me, smiling a familiar smile. Chris had always been a pillar to me, sturdy, dependable. He was too practical to go crazy. And his family needed him to be reliable. Hell, I needed him to be reliable. If he were to come undone, well...

"You might as well jump," I said. "End it all."

He raised his face and looked at me, sighed.

The wind moved cold above us and I began to laugh.

"C'mon, man," I said. "Get up. If you don't snap out of this, I'm going to jump."



I stood up and looked at the sky. If I were to jump, I wouldn't have to worry about anything. I might even make some grand transition into some other state of being. I stepped to the edge, but lost my nerve, realizing I could never be cold enough to do something so unsettling.

When I turned around, Chris was standing at the window, looking at me.

"You ready to go, nutcase?" he asked.

I walked away from the edge, my death and my relief.

"I think that my thoughts are a thousand times cooler than what actually comes out of my mouth," I said to Chris as he stepped back through the window.

"They would have to be," he said, and disappeared.

We walked down the three flights of stairs and out into the hallway to the first bank of elevators. Chris hit the button.

"Do you mind if we skip dinner tonight? I have a few things to settle at home," he said as we stepped onto the elevator.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I eat almost every day, you know."

"Oh shit," he said. "I read your article today. I've been so worried about my own life that I almost forgot about it completely."

A local paper had just published my first story, an interview with the head of an independent publisher. Just a small piece, really. No big deal. But a start.

"I understand," I said. "Don't worry about it."

"But it was good," he said. "It came across really well. I think you might have a future."

"That's how it works," I said laughing. "I've been writing for how many years, but nobody gives a shit until they see it in print."

"C'mon," he said. "That's not how it is at all. I was proud when I read it."

"I knew what you meant," I said. "Thank you."

We were back on Chris's floor and he paused and asked me again if I was sure I didn't mind getting together to celebrate another time.

"Honestly, Chris, go home," I said. "But, shit, I forgot to tell you about my bus ride in. My mind was so clear..."

"Here," he said, removing a key from his key ring and handing it to me. "Go into my office and write it down for me. I'll read it in the morning. Just put the key in my coffee cup before you leave, all right?"

"Sounds good," I said.

"Oh," he said. "I forgot. I had something for you anyway. Open the top drawer of my desk and you'll see it."

"You bought me something?" I asked, shaking my head.

"It's nothing huge," he said. "Besides, it's not that often I get a chance to meet a big-shot writer."

"Shut up," I said. "Go home."

"I could wait and give you a ride home," he said.

"Leave!" I said.

"All right," he said. "I'll talk to you later."

He turned, descending the stairs like an old drinking friend, or a brother. His footsteps echoed through the hallway, signaling his goodbye as I walked back to his office.

The entire floor was quiet, since most of the people leave around five. That's usually why I dig coming here at night. Everything seems fake. The hallways belong to you personally, as if the building exists for you alone.

The room was dark through the glass door. I put the key into the lock, looking up and down the hallway before turning it and going in. I made my way back to Chris's office, turning the light on as I entered. I stared at the picture on his wall for a minute before sitting in his chair. I opened the top drawer and a small newspaper-wrapped square peered out. I smiled. He had wrapped it in a copy of my story. I felt a confident happiness as I opened the gift.

Then I closed my eyes. I couldn't believe it. It was a Coltrane CD, a different recording than I had been listening to earlier, but still a strange coincidence. As I opened the case, a scrap of paper fell out. I picked it up and read it.

Paul. Check out this album. It's the only thing that got me through last night. I think you should have it.

—Chris

P.S. Oh, check it out in headphones if you can!

Unbelievable. How strange that he would leave this for me today. It was some kind of sign. Somehow, the fates were pushing me in one direction or another. I had to act. I picked up the telephone and called my apartment.

"Hello?"

"Amy," I said. "Hey. What's going on?"

"Nothing," she said, "What are you doing? I thought you were meeting Chris."

"I am," I said. "I already did. Listen, I want to ask you something."

"What?" she said. "What's wrong?"



"Absolutely nothing," I said. "It's just the opposite, everything is right. Everything is perfect."

"Really," she said.

"Listen, do you want to have a baby?" I asked.

"Do I want to have a baby?" she repeated.

"Yes, with me," I said. "Do you want to have my child?"

"What are you talking about, Paul?" she asked.

"I don't know, exactly," I said, "but I think that we should have a child together. I want to be a father. I want to be something serious. I think we'd make good parents. And we could raise a child well—deliberately, tenderly. I think we could create the most amazing thing together. Then we would be bound together for life. We would be bound to creation and everything that lives or breathes."

Somehow, from nowhere, she paused and sort of laughed.

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"Dead fucking serious," I said.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Where am I?" I said. "What do you mean where am I? Aren't you listening to what I'm saying? Don't you get it?"

"I get it," she said. "I just don't know what to say. I don't want to talk about it over the phone. Are you coming home?"

"Of course I'm coming home," I said. "I can't wait to see you. I miss you today for some reason."

"For some reason?" she laughed.

"Do you love me or don't you?"

"Never have," she said smiling.

"Good," I said. "I'm on my way."

"I'll be waiting."

I sat there for a minute. It was so quiet, and the walls were painted white. My brother had been working in this room for almost ten years, ten very plain years. He didn't really like it, but he couldn't afford to quit and was probably too lazy, or uninspired, to look for another job. I picked up a stack of papers and threw them over my head. The air was busy boring gravity. Everything just fell to the ground, made a mess. I picked up the phone again, chose the building's internal line, and dialed zero.

"Hello," the operator said.

"How are you?" I said. "Could I possibly get a cab out front as soon as possible."

"I think it's possible," the woman laughed.

"Yeah?" I asked.

She asked me the details—where to, what entrance, how many passengers—thanked me and hung up.

The room had a buzz to it now. An electric pulse bounced and whipped through the room with the conformed path of an insect. It blanketed me, and I became too warm so I stood up. I grabbed the disc, made for the door, went back to leave Chris a note, hesitated, then made for the door again, all the while kicking around the papers that I had thrown. I decide to skip the note, quickly leaving the room, the hallway, the elevator and the building.

The cold-air wind came down again, as if to say, “Well, quite an evening,” and I nodded, since I had to agree. The lights were on now, the city full-blown, spotlights and windows, carlights and entranceways. I didn’t feel as though I could possibly be the same creature that rode the bus in an hour ago. I felt completely different and a wave of tired energy came upon me. I sat down on a bench across the street from the building’s main entrance, where the cab would stop. I looked up at the top of this massive structure before me. Unbelievable. How does one create such a thing? How are the decisions made? It’s tremendous and awful, but how should it be? What were my suggestions? And why should anyone listen?

I reached into my pocket and removed the CD player. It belonged to Amy’s sister, so I couldn’t help but think of Amy, sitting, looking through a magazine or something. I love her remarkably, and things are that simple. I placed the headphones over my ears, set the new disc into the player.

I am back again, and the sound is here, all that I know. Everything is peaceful. The people walk in and out, the buses absently thunder by, the birds peck at nothing and scamper and beg. I watch the revolving door at the base of the building churn and spit people. Something’s going to come through that door any minute. Something important. Something new. From out of the warm light, it’ll emerge into the world to touch the side of my face, to feel alive and forget for ten minutes that death is chasing.

My mind has no doubt or concern, while Trane blows and controls what seems to be a blueprint for the way that I’m feeling.

And when I realize what it is I’ve been hoping to see, waiting to see (not something new at all, but the life that I have loved and want to continue loving), I stand up and walk across the cool city street with my mind like a paradise miracle.



Reba Connell

DESIRE

women walk by me
their breasts accentuated
by taut fabric
lush with promise

what I feel
is not competition
but desire

Jeannette Drake

Invisible

Jesus! he called. He didn't really believe in Jesus and hardly in the sound that flew from his mouth. He'd said it without thinkin', a habit he got from grandma Maelan. She called Jesus for everythin', good or bad. Jesus! When she hit the number and won fifty dollars. Jesus! When she found out that Virginia Electric gave her more time before turnin' off the lights. And she died three years ago from a stroke, still callin' Jesus' name. Jesus hadn't done nothin' 'bout her heart condition or her blood pressure. So, callin' Him all the time hadn't done a bit of good. Well, it's a good thing Grandma gone. Not here now to know 'bout the mess he in.

Smokin' blunts all the time. Happened 'fo he knew it. First off just a little puff once or twice after school. Not that many people knew and Grandma never found out. He was still in middle school. Seventh grade, his last year and he trusted that counselor, the one who held in-school suspension every Wednesday at lunchtime. He told her and she promised not to tell the principal. He's been a baby anyway, afraid of the principal. What could she do 'bout him smokin' reefer after school, long as it won't on school property, there won't nothin' she could do. Anyway, that's all over. Now, he in the eleventh grade, almost 18. Jesus! Damn! There he go again. What he think Jesus could do about this mess?

He didn't know Ree-Ree pregnant when he got her to try the stuff and now she freakin' out, seein' slave ships and shit and old white people who ain't real. Man! It can't be the weed that make her act like she actin', makin' her see all this stupid stuff. She musta got hold of somethin' else. Somethin' he ain't never tried, maybe like some of that acid them hippies had back in the day. Long as he been smokin' blunts he ain't never seen no white people old or young sittin' up in his house at the table in his dinin' room and start talkin' to em. If he had, his Aunt Bea would have had him locked up somewhere for good. She don't have time for no nonsense, special not the way Ree-Ree be doin'. And you can't never tell when she gon' start. Man, you can be in the middle of watchin' *The Simpsons* or *The Survivors* or somthin' and first thing you know she talkin' all loud to one of them people she say she see.

"Kiss my black ass, you old white hepher!"



In this day, he ain't never know Ree-Ree to say one bad word. She the sweetest smartest girl in Shelby High, a cheerleader, president of the Student Council and her parents think they hot stuff too. Compared to his folks they a lot better off when it come to the money. But they ain't never really look down on him the way some black folks do. They never seemed to mind that he and Ree-Ree been friends, ever since the fifth grade. Jesus, now he'd gone and got her pregnant, and on top of that she start, ever since last month, actin' like somethin' loose in her head for real. How she gon' take her final exams and graduate if she keep actin' like this? And what she gon' do 'bout the scholarship she won to that Methodist college her momma want her to go to even though they Baptist. Ree-Ree smart. Always wanted to be an architect. Don't get nothin' but straight A's in art and math. And she ain't but seventeen.

He don't know what to do no more. Miss Gee, that counselor he had in middle school, he used to talk to her when he see her at the CVS once in a while, but he hear she retired, moved out of town. If Aunt Bea find he got a girl pregnant and on drugs, he be out on the street quicker than you bat your eye. End up a homeless bum, like them guys at the lie-brer.

It almost too late. Ree-Ree gettin' worse. Yesterday mornin' in the middle of the honor's assembly, she come up to the podium 'fo her turn and dis Mr. Stanley, the assistant principal, the one who help her apply for the Beacon Light Scholarship. She go Public Enemy on him loud as she can right in the mike, "You and Elvis don't mean shit to me. He was a straight out racist simple and plain. Motherfuck you, him and John Wayne."

She almost cause a riot. The security guards had a really hard time. Half of the assembly went wild laughin' and yellin' and the other half look like they ain't know what to do. Some of the teachers look like they gon' cry. Special, Miss Evans. She finally got Ree-Ree away from the mike, standin' up there goin' "Mutherfuck you, him and John Wayne. You, him, and John Wayne" and half the students startin' yellin' back to her, "You, him and John Wayne. You, him and John Wayne." Then nobody pay Mr. Stanley any mind, tellin' everybody they out of order. Miss Evans got Ree-Ree to the nurse office and call both her momma and her daddy from their job and they took her home or to the hospital or somewhere. The assembly couldn't go on. Security had to get everybody back to class and then the whole school put on code red for 45 minutes. And nobody hardly did any work the rest of the day. They shoulda just let everybody go home.

Anyway, now he feel really bad. He love Ree-Ree but her parents ain't gon' let him no where near her after this. He never expected them to act like this, not the way they go to church every Sunday. Special Ree-Ree's dad. He

a nice man. All the kids like him, even one or two of them hard-heads from New York. Ree-Ree daddy musta know some kids smoke reefer. He real quiet man most of the time, just look at you real hard if he think you doin' somethin' wrong, don't say a word. Somebody say he drink a little, but he don't know nobody actually seen him. He don't see why Ree-Ree daddy didn't just come out and say somethin'. Now with all this he ain't even gon' hardly get a chance to be with his own kid. Ree-Ree say they want her to place the baby up fo' adoption. They don't believe in abortion. It's a good thing 'cause he don't want no girl gettin' rid of his baby, special if it a boy. He want a son. He want a son grow up and be strong. Be somebody like Jesse Jackson say.

He ain't got but one more year and he be finished with this joint, man. Everybody say he need a diploma but he don't see what good it do. He can make more money runnin' rocks for Tayron and 'em. They know the real deal. But grandma said, "Boy, you run them drugs, you gon' have a short life." Right now though he don't know what difference it makes. Short or long. If he can't be with Ree-Ree, he might as well be dead. What good it do? Having a piece of paper, man. Shit. Jesus Christ what he gon' do, Jesus, huh? Would Jesus or somebody tell him that? And how long he been sittin' out here on these bleachers, he don't know. He guess he better go on home. It almost time for Aunt Bea to get off from work and he ain't in no mood to listen at her mouth wantin' to know he finish his homework. He don't get no homework this time of year, no way, but he can't explain that to Aunt Bea, so he just say yes m'am, he finish. Long as she don't ask to see it, he straight. Tayron and 'em don't have to go through none of this. His momma don't care, but he know his grandma Maelean right. Tayron gon' end up dead or in jail, fresh meat 'fo he 23. Just watch. He hear he almost got shot two weeks ago 'cause he two hundred dollars short. Man, that stupid. Holdin' back on people's money. He ain't ready to go like that with his head and guts splattered all up in the street.



Oh Lord, there she go again. Callin' him for no reason. He wish she'd hurry and fall asleep or go to prayer meetin' or somethin' and leave him alone. One thing. Grandma, she didn't bother him all the time, special when she see he busy playin' Halo and his other games, she just leave him alone. But Aunt Bea a pain in the butt. Jesus, what she want now? He took the trash out yesterday and she done fill it up again with all that cellophane and crap she bring home from them college teachers she clean for every other Wednesday. He don't know why she take all their junk. She don't do nothing' 'cept throw most of it in the garbage and then he got to make another trip to the dumpster.



He hate these apartments anyway. God, this joint heavy. Feel like a ton of bricks. He don't know how Aunt Bea carry all this mess in her bag and get on the bus. All these old paperbacks and shit, what she want with this? She don't never read nothin' but the Bible. Just like Grandma. God. Their Eyes Were Watchin' God. What this 'bout? Let's see. Just flip this joint open. Page 98.

I god, Ah don't make out no such lie? But it's uh time fuh all things. But it's awful tuh see so many people don't want nothin' but uh full belly and uh place tuh lay down and sleep afterwards. It makes me sad sometimes and then agin it makes me mad. They say things sometimes that tickles me nearly to death, but Ah won't laugh jus tuh discourage'em.

It's uh time fuh all things? He looks at the page again. It's uh time fuh all things? How many times he hear them words? More than he can count. Right outta Grandma mouth. Aunt Bea got to see this. Grandma words right here in this book. "It's uh time fuh all things... uh time tuh be born, and uh time tuh die; uh time tuh kill and uh time tuh heal; uh time to weep, and uh time tuh laugh; uh time to mourn, an uh time tuh dance."

Jesus!

Olga Economos

Namesake

Ever since Antonia fell pregnant, all she thought about was names. They consumed her. She read them off the pinned tags of clerks in enclosed subway booths; *Fred*, *Patricia* and *Leroy*. She mouthed them off cashiers' lapels at supermarkets; *Donna*, *Pat* and *Sam*. On television, she waited for the names of newscasters to appear as they read the day's events. There was *Paul Fox* at six, *Jill Brooke* at seven and *Stacey Nelson* who co-anchored with *William Rogers* after the late show.

Antonia and Nick, her husband, were Greek. That meant her daughter, according to Greek custom and tradition dating back to God knows when, would be named after her mother-in-law, *Paraskevi*. In Greek families, that's how it was with firstborns. If the child was a boy, his name would have been *Kostantinos*, after Nick's dad. The sonogram had said it was a girl though and so the matter was settled. *Paraskevi* it was. Antonia weighed the name in her head. It felt heavy and outdated. A name ripped from the dark ages.

Nick let out a deep breath, ran his hands through his salt and pepper hair. He was gray since seventeen.

"I don't know why you're doing this," he said. "You know we gotta name her *Paraskevi*, after Mom." He sat on the opposite end of the bed and massaged Antonia's right foot. The area around her right ankle was swollen, inflated like a water tube. "The doctor said you have to take it easy, stay off your feet," he said. "This name thing is making you stressed." Like her, he spoke with a Brooklyn accent, leaving the "r" out of certain words. They lived with his mother in the two-family home he grew up in. His mother, a widow, was on the first floor, Antonia and Nick were on the second. "You need to drop the name game, babe," he said, then pressed down hard on her ankle.

With her hand, Antonia motioned for him to go gentle. It hurt. "All I'm saying is stop driving yourself insane, princess," he said and then stopped when she said, "Enough" between her clenched teeth.

It was a late February night and the windows had just a hint of frost. Despite this, the ceiling fan hummed above their bed, the blades slicing the air into thick uneven pieces. The fan was a prerequisite to their late night talks. Antonia was convinced and Nick agreed, that the walls were thin, flimsy like soft cardboard. Through the floorboards, Antonia could hear her mother-in-

law's movements downstairs; the way her bed squeaked when she turned, or how her dresser drawer moaned when she pulled it open. As nice as she was, Antonia was sure her mother-in-law's ears were on what they said. After all, she was only human. Antonia would have done the same. Her ears would be radars on alert. The fan at least, drowned out some of their conversation.

"Paraskevi," Antonia suddenly said. She closed her eyes and watched the letters march across all sloppy and disheveled like a line of defeated soldiers. When translated, the name meant Friday. The thought of naming her child Friday made Antonia hiccup.

"Don't be that way," Nick said. "You know we have to."

"Says who?" Antonia questioned. "The Greek name police?"

"Antonia," Nick said, "baby, you are Greek. You know the rules."

"The rules," she said.

"The rules," he repeated. "You were named after your grandmother."

"Yeah, but her name was pronounceable," she said. "It was translatable, you could Americanize it. People are going to butcher Paraskevi. Besides, it means Friday." She propped herself up on her elbows and stared at him. "Nick-O what type of name is that?" She always added the "O" to his name for effect whenever they disagreed. Nick took in her heart-shaped face and her crisp brown eyes half-hidden behind her corkscrew curls of hair. Her lips were all pout. He wanted to kiss her *bang, smack*, right there.

In truth, Nick agreed. Paraskevi was ugly. The crew down at the construction site who bothered to ask, made a face when Nick told them on their lunch break. One guy grunted and another burped up his pastrami sandwich. They were about to say something but luckily some chick in a tight skirt and killer heels walked by and the crew went on to talk about other things.

"Toni, baby," he said, gently turning her towards him. Her eyes zeroed in on the baby name books piled to the side of the bed. The pages turned in her head. She saw *Rebecca, Suzanne* and *Joanne*.

His eyes locked themselves onto hers and pleaded. "Paraskevi is Mom's name and she would be offended if we didn't name her first granddaughter that," he said. "Mom has done so much for us. It would be out of respect."

Antonia's eyes scanned their paneled bedroom. They caught the wool blanket folded on the trunk his mother brought back from Greece. They crossed to the curtains with the embroidered edges his mother had stitched. They rested on the dress crocheted this very afternoon. Stuffed with tissue for form, its sleeves and collar were scalloped and a tulle ribbon snaked its way through the hem. She had to admit, it was beautiful and dainty—exactly what a newborn girl should wear.

Antonia turned to her husband and asked, "Can't we use it as a middle name?"

He closed his eyes and tried to understand her misgivings but in the process had fallen asleep.



The baby was due towards the end of March. The monthly visits to Dr. Stone's grew to bi-monthly, then increased in frequency to the weekly point. Sitting down, Antonia felt the baby stir, so she cupped her belly with one hand and moved the other one around clockwise.

Angela, the nurse, sat behind a frosted window that slid from side to side. She opened it and leaned her blonde head out to say that Dr. Stone was running late. The snaps of her gum was incessant and the sounds of the radio traveled over the makeshift partition.

Each time she visited, Antonia's eyes caught the name tag pinned to the v-shaped neckline of Angela's white shirt. The letters A-N-G-E-L-A sparkled on the gold bar. It was after her second visit when Antonia looked up the nurse's name in her book. It said, "*Angela. Greek. Messenger from God, an angel.*" She felt compelled to tell the nurse this information, but Angela always seemed hurried and indifferent, with a can't-be-bothered attitude. So Antonia waited for the right time to share the news. So far, it hadn't come.

Today, across from Antonia, a woman sat knitting a blanket in patches of yellow and white. Antonia thought of her mother-in-law who was making a similar blanket for her future granddaughter. For the past month, she knitted and stitched in the kitchen, glancing up now and then to watch her noontime soap.

Antonia studied the woman opposite her and tried to size her up. A nine-monther, she decided from the way her belly dragged down and how the rings cut into her skin. The woman's blonde hair was clipped back in a ponytail and managed to look chic even though she was very pregnant. She looked towards Antonia and smiled, knitting away. The movement of her pins, going up and down, up and down, soothed Antonia. She patted down bits of her hair that managed to stand up, straight and still like wired antennas, all from the static of pulling off her hat.

The woman asked, "When are you due?"

"End of March," Antonia said.

"In two weeks," the woman giggled. "It is our first."

Bingo, Antonia thought. She could tell that she was about to pop and in her head predicted next week.

The room was divided in half, split by three rows of green chairs on one side and three on the other. On the wall, hung a corkboard with

photos of babies born under Dr. Stone's care. The pictures were thumb tacked and so the ends of some had curled up like scrolls.

"My name is Mary Weiss," the woman said.

Mary, Antonia thought. Immediately, her mind turned to page 56. The entry for Mary came after *Marvel*. There it was, Mary: "*Latin for bitter, bitterness. Sometimes rebellious.*"

"Antonia Papaloloupoulos," Antonia replied.

"Wow," Mary laughed, "that's a run-on."

"It's Greek," Antonia said. She fidgeted.

"That explains it," Mary said. "All you Greeks have such long names. The guy who runs the diner by me is *Yiannis Georgiades*." She said it with a perfect Greek accent. The "r" purred from her lips and the "d" was a soft "th" sound. "I get my Greek salad from him," Mary said.

As Mary continued to talk, Antonia nodded, her mind elsewhere. "All you Greeks..." banged in her head like a gong. As if the Greek community was a posse, a gang whose agenda was to hand their offspring long names. It brought Antonia back to first grade. The teacher, Ms. Pearl stumbled across her name during roll call each morning. "It is so ethnic," Ms. Pearl said making a certain noise with her tongue as if she just tasted something so sour. *Ethnic*, Antonia thought, what does that mean? By week two, her name was shortened to Toni instead. "There are twenty-three other students in class," the teacher explained, "and saying yours alone takes time away from them." So Toni it became and stuck throughout the years.

"That is a pretty blanket," Antonia said. "My mother-in-law is making one just like it in pink."

"So, you are having a girl?" Mary asked. The needles were suspended in mid-air, paused.

"Yes," Antonia said.

"Me too," Mary agreed. Both women beamed.

"I am glad," Mary said. She cupped her hands around her mouth and said, "They have cuter outfits at Baby Gap."

Antonia smiled and agreed.

"I know Catherine here is going to be all hats and bows," Mary said. She rubbed her belly and smiled down.

Catherine, Antonia thought, it means *pure* in Greek.

"My husband's Jewish," Mary continued. "I'm not." Her head was bent, concentrating on a tug the yarn formed. "We had to name the baby after someone who died in the family. It's their tradition." Her eyebrows narrowed together, focusing on the knot that was ruining her pattern. "Larry's sister's name was Claudia," she said. "Poor girl, she died in a car accident." Mary

looked up and whispered, "Drunk." The knot then released and Mary continued to knit. She said, "We only had to use the first initial of her name though. Thank goodness for that. If it was going to be a boy, we agreed on Clarence."

Clarence, Antonia thought, *Roman for bright.*

While Mary continued to talk, Antonia thought of what she said. The idea of naming your baby with an initial from someone else agreed with her. It was a good system, a compromise, a half-way meeting point. Like a register gun scanning store items, Antonia's mind bleeped. What names begin with "p"? *Patricia, Penelope, Pamela, Pauline.*

"Have you picked out a name for your daughter?" Mary asked.

Antonia swallowed and let out a robotic, "Yes."

At that moment, Dr. Stone walked in, cutting their talk short. He apologized for being late, pointed to Antonia and motioned for her to follow him. Antonia hauled herself up and waved good-bye to Mary, thankful for Dr. Stone's save.



The talk with Mary prompted Antonia to make plans in her head. First, she would talk to Nick and get him on her side, have him become her staunchest ally. Under no circumstances was her mother-in-law to hear their conversation. The fan would have to be on high to block the tiniest utter. She couldn't afford to have her conscience plagued with guilt.

When Antonia had returned home from Dr. Stone's, she found her laundry washed and folded, left in a basket outside their front door. Her mother-in-law did things like that all the time. When they were newlyweds, these gestures embarrassed her and felt like intrusions. She thought of her mother-in-law's startled reaction when she folded Antonia's thongs, sexy lace bras or ratty underwear reserved for period days. But now that she was pregnant, Antonia welcomed her help. She actually wished her mother-in-law could be a little mean, a bit more opinionated and nosy. Oh yes, how she yearned to have her be a meddling nuisance. Then that would give Antonia that extra edge and ammunition to change Nick's mind about the name. But her sweet demeanor, kind smile, and voice that only went so high, marked her for sainthood.

Tonight, when Nick reached to turn the fan off. Antonia said, "Nick don't, I want to talk." Nick was tired. His back felt sore and his hands were raw from the heavy lifting out in the cold. Tomorrow, a new gig was going down and he had to be at the site by sunrise. The mayor was planning to attend and cut some ribbon held up by two poles. The last thing Nick wanted to do was "talk." Nevertheless, he turned to Antonia, swallowed his yawns and half-listened.



He heard the name “Mary”, the words “Jewish tradition,” mixed up with “drunk,” “driving” and “dead.” She said something about an initial and attaching letters to it. Nick closed his eyes. It sounded like a bunch of jabberwocky. He fell asleep.

She nudged him.

He didn’t answer.

“Nick,” she said, poking his side. He stirred and his right eye half-opened.

“What?” he asked. His voice was distant, hollow, on the verge of a growl.

“What do you think?” she asked.

He mumbled.

“You’re talking into the pillow,” she said. “I can’t hear you.”

“Your tellin’ me you want to give our daughter a Jewish name?” he asked.

Antonia rolled her eyes. Sometimes he was so thick. “No, I do not want to give our daughter a Jewish name,” she said. “Didn’t you listen, Nick?” She said his name as if it burned the inside of her mouth.

“The first letter would be the same as your mother’s, but the rest would be something else,” Antonia explained. “At least it would honor your mother and give her some comfort. Mary said...”

Nick’s chest rose and fell. He thought his heart would come out of his mouth. She said the name Mary over and over again. He thought, Who the fuck is Mary? Through his nostrils, he took in strong whiffs of air, pissed off and enraged. The hours at night held no time for this. When she asked for his opinion again, he didn’t respond. He didn’t trust his sharp tongue.

Once, at Dr. Stone’s, he had come across an article on wombs. *Babies in the wombs are sponges*, it said. *They pick up their mother’s stress during pregnancy.* Great, he thought and slammed the magazine shut.

Later that night, he dreamt of sponges. All types. There were ones used to wash dishes, yellow and porous on one side, with the flip being a coarse blue strip. Others had shapes, like circles and squares in colors of pink, yellow and blue. Then there were the hard loofah ones, and for some reason, Antonia’s womb came to mind. He thought of his daughter swimming in her stomach getting scratched and cut from all the nervous tendencies Antonia had. It was then he decided to say yes to all the things Antonia desired: first the crib that turned into a toddler sleigh bed, then the stroller that played music as it got pushed, and even the special paint that cost \$20 more than the others. “It’s a special line,” Antonia said. “The vivid colors are meant to stimulate newborns.”

Tonight, though, the whole name thing orbited around his head like a dense equation. It made his temples throb and gave him a headache. His eyes caught the time on the digital clock. The numbers glared midnight. Nick calculated four hours of sleep. Fact: he would be shit-faced for work tomorrow. He decided to yes her for now. It was all in the name of sleep, and of course, for little Paraskevi's scratch-free existence in the womb.



The next afternoon, Antonia sat on the radiator and read the entire *P* section of her name book, starting with *Paige* and ending with *Purity*. Her mind played around with the combinations all day. *Pamela* could be spelled with a double *L* and *Peggy* was a derivation from *Margaret*. The heat hissed through the radiator and warmed her backside. through the vents, Antonia smelled her mother-in-laws cooking. It was *spanakopita*. Spinach pie. Antonia's favorite dish.

When Nick walked up the pathway, Antonia took her place in the kitchen. After her three phone calls to his job, (*What? When? Today?*) he agreed to speak to his mother when he got home. Negotiations would take place right below, so Antonia tiptoed around, hoping the creaking and cracking of the floorboards wouldn't turn her in. In the stillness of the room, she heard a kitchen chair slide across a floor, a cupboard door open and the faucet sink turn on. She wanted to get on her knees and press her ear down to listen, but couldn't. Her belly, now round like a globe, would scrape the floor before she could even assume a position on all fours. Besides, what would Nick say if he caught her like that? He would never let her live it down, she thought. That was Nick for you, she told herself, always taunting and teasing. She was certain that if he caught her in that position, he would bring it up for the rest of their married life. Her thoughts got distracted when the sound of the television came on and the voice of a newscaster drifted up. A few seconds later, there was silence and all Antonia heard was the clinking of ice cubes being made in the refrigerator next to her.

When Nick came upstairs he handed Antonia a plate of the spinach pie. "From Mom," he said. Antonia took this as a good sign. His mother was telling her that she approved. She was extending the so called olive branch. Otherwise, Antonia reasoned, why would you send a plate up of her favorite food?

"Well," Antonia said.

"Well," Nick responded as he began to unlace his construction boots. She looked his way hard.

His eyes blinked back, "What?"



"What did she say?"

"What could she say"

"Nick!"

"Toni!"

"Nick-O!"

"I told her," he said and then started to undress. "What do you want her to do?" he asked. "Rejoice?" He took off his shirt, pulled off his dirt-caked jeans and stood in the kitchen in his underwear, his body firm and muscles chiseled from the construction work. Next to him, Antonia felt like a tub and couldn't wait to have the baby and lose the weight so she could finally see some tone on her own body.

"I am going to shower," he said. "I stink." She tried to reach down and pick up the clothes he left behind, but couldn't. So she kicked them hard across the room and down the hall.

In bed, all Antonia could think about was her mother-in-law. All five feet of her stooped over, cutting squares in the spinach pie and getting tears caught in the folds of her skin as Nick told her the news. He didn't have tact. He didn't know how to preface it, she thought. She should have done it herself. Explained it patiently like she learned long ago in the psychology course she took at community college for eight Saturdays in a row. Now everything was ruined. Shame and regret tugged at her insides. Her poor mother-in-law, she thought. That poor, poor woman, who cooked and cleaned for her, who sat up late knitting things for the baby and took her side whenever she and Nick fought. What must she think? These thoughts exhausted Antonia to such an extent that she collapsed on the bed and fell asleep, deep in snores by the time Nick walked in. Not wanting to rouse his wife, he threw a blanket over her and gently glided under the covers right next to where Antonia lay. He thought, ever since the pregnancy, Antonia had changed. It was probably all the hormones and breast milk gushing through her making her act this way, he assured himself. This behavior wasn't permanent, he hoped. No way. That was why he didn't bother telling his mother about the name dilemma downstairs. What would be the point? If there was anyone who knew Antonia, it was yours truly himself. She was logical and sensible and he was certain, in fact, that she would most definitely come around once the baby was born. But for now Nick would play good sport and just pretend.

The next day, Antonia noticed that her mother-in-law acted as though nothing had changed. She smiled (real sweetly), massaged Antonia's sore shoulders (the strength of her hands were a Godsend), served her chamomile tea sweetened with honey (all homemade), and then worked on

completing the baby's blanket (the pattern was turning out lovely and the stitching was first class).

See, Antonia told herself, she is not mad, she understands. What does Nick know?

Now every day was the due date so Antonia sat downstairs with her mother-in-law, just in case. She didn't dare bring her name books down. It would be like taunting her. Instead, she studied her mother-in-law's expert hands knitting the blanket.

It was during this time, Antonia especially noticed her fingers. They were slanted more to the right, the fingernails yellowed and cracked, the veins bulging out of the skin like the roots of a hundred-year-old-tree. They worked furiously and stitched the edges of the knitted odyssey she was making. She wondered, where had those hands been?

"A blanket for the baby," her mother-in-law said. "The ones in the hospital are no good. They are polyester." Antonia watched as her head bobbed up and down, left to right. Her mother-in-law held up a just-stitched area of the blanket in front of her disapproving eyes. Her lips twisted in disagreement and she took out the stitching to start all over again. "It has to be perfect," she explained.



The weeks passed and there was now one name Antonia toyed with and that was *Phoebe*, Greek for *shining* or *brilliant*. The night she decided to tell Nick, Antonia, in her excitement, forgot to take the precautionary measure and click the fan on thrice. So all that was said was heard by her mother-in-law through the thin floorboard below. "Phoebe," Antonia said, then recited what it meant. "Phoebe," she said, "sounds so much nicer than Paraskevi." When Antonia searched Nick's face for a reaction, she got a blank slate.

He turned to his side and said, "Hey babe, I got that new gig I was telling you about. It starts next week."



On the day Antonia went into labor, Nick could not be tracked down. The job out on Staten Island was in the middle of nowhere and closer to the Jersey side instead of Brooklyn.

"Baby, they are paying me time and a half," Nick said when Antonia had first objected because of the distance. "They'll give it to someone else if I don't start."

"But your cell phone doesn't work out there," she said. "What if I go into labor and you can't be reached?"

"So call the main number and they'll patch your call through," he suggested. She turned to face the window when he spoke and noticed that it

was half snowing/half raining outside. In five days, it would be April. In five days, she would be a mother. In five days, she would have a daughter. In five days, they will be a family. "Think of it this way," Nick said, "that fancy crib we bought could be paid off in one day." In five days, Antonia thought. In five days, she began to wonder. In five days...she began to cry.

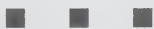


When her water broke, Antonia called the main number of the job site. "Tell him to call me right back," she said. "I'm in labor." She called that morning from her mother-in-law's kitchen phone, an old rotary with the numbers half scratched off, breadcrumbs and parsley stuck in the plastic dialing circles.

"Right-O," the man said. "Okie, dokie," he added, his voice dead calm. He scribbled down the message. It read, *Nick. Wife. Baby. Going to hospital.* He thought, Who was this Nick guy? He didn't know the new crew yet and they were far from the trailer that served as an office. It was noon and the paper bag he wrote on had the special of the day in it. It was meatloaf from Auntie's deli with a corner piece of Italian bread torn by hand. There was no way he was going to eat the meatloaf cold, have the bread turn hard. First, he would finish up his lunch and then walk over to find this Nick man. Besides, it took hours, sometimes days, for a woman to have a baby. This he knew. He had three of his own and his wife's labors were some motherfuckers.



Her mother-in-law rubbed her back, said prayers in Greek and kissed the icons on the wall. Antonia's eyes stayed pressed to the phone. Ring, she thought, ring. Nick or no Nick the baby was on her way. Antonia felt a pressure inside. The little one was ready to pop like a champagne cork. Antonia called for a cab.



In the delivery room, Antonia pushed and pushed. Still no Nick. Where was he? Leave it to last minute Nick, she thought, blowing out on her lips in pain. Her mother-in-law stood by her side looking like a small green troll in the hospital scrubs that Dr. Stone insisted she wear. She whispered to Antonia, "An angel is about to be born." If it's an angel, Antonia thought, then why does it feel like hell.

"Not much longer," Dr. Stone said. He waved her mother-in-law over to the front. "Come and see your granddaughter being born," he said. Her mother-in-law was able to see a crown of dark hair. It looked luxurious. From where she lay, Antonia watched her mother-in-law squat down, her weak legs supported her bony body, and her hands pushed away the gray strands of hair that escaped from her bun. In that stale hospital room, with all the equipment beeping and coughing like a bad cold, her mother-in-law's gray eyes

shone like two bright stars. They lit up the room in a warm glow and paved the way for her granddaughter's entrance into the world.



In room 312B of Kings Hospital, Antonia watched her mother-in-law unwrap the baby from the standard hospital blanket. She pulled out the knitted one she managed to grab before they left the house. White flowers dotted the edges and in the middle was a rose with its green leaves unfurled like arms. It was a tapestry of detail.

A nurse took Antonia's temperature and felt her pulse. From her bed, Antonia watched grandmother rock granddaughter in her arms. The dingy yellow curtains pushed aside, revealed a window; its glass gray and stained with smog. Despite this, the sun managed to pierce through and frame grandmother and granddaughter in a halo of light. They were an icon of happiness, Antonia thought. Not even a portraiture could have captured such tenderness between the two. Antonia's thoughts turned soft and her mind became fuzzy. She began to cry. The nurse took the thermometer out and patted her hand. "There, there," she said. "What's your daughter's name?" she asked hoping to cheer Antonia up. Before Antonia could respond, her mother-in-law stepped forth and interjected.

"Phoebe," she said in a thick Greek accent with her shoulders squared back and head tilted up all proud.

The outside pounding of Nick's heavy footsteps interrupted Antonia's thoughts before she could respond. Knowing he was about to meet his daughter for the very first time calmed her and forced order to take place in her heart.

Grandmother handed granddaughter over to Nick and watched her son adjust to fatherhood. She sensed his awkwardness at holding such a small human being and motioned for him to sit next to his wife.

"Antonia," she bragged, "is a natural at this. She'll show you the way." Nick took his place by wife's bedside while his mother stood back to admire the family they had become.

"Her name will be Paraskevi," Antonia suddenly announced, first looking at Nick and then her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law began to protest but Antonia held her arm up and said she would have none of it. "Paraskevi," she insisted, "in tribute, after her *yia-yia*." With this announcement, Nick immediately relaxed. The rocking became easier and his thoughts turned to sponges. A soft tender one came to mind and that's when he knew everything would be alright.



Kelly Elayne

Firecracker

This White boy could groove. He wasn't just mimicking moves he'd seen some shiny Black rapper work in a video. It was coming from somewhere. It was the busted transmission he couldn't afford to fix, it was the Puerto Rican girl who'd gone back to her ex for the fifth time, it was the cocky slickness of that chiseled dead lyricist rhyming, "I get around."

Funk had reached an exquisite level of ripeness in the confines of the confines of the Chinatown lounge's paint-chipped upstairs room. The heat of the day was all stuck up in there, playing hide-and-go-seek with some tired ceiling fans. Evaporating sweat steaming off bodies clouding the dark pit with funk mist, but it was good that way. That's what they were there for. To smell their bodies working, pheromones cooking, as their muscles and joints popped and locked and slid from shape to shape in time to the music.

This Black girl could groove. She wasn't just shaking flesh like bait on a hook. It was coming from somewhere. It was the workweek dripping from her pores, it was the man she wanted but couldn't have shadow dancing between her legs, it was the fevered moan of that fat dead lyricist rhyming, "peepee when you see me."

A level down, Asian cats were tinkering instruments to a jazz beat for girls sipping good liquor from cheap plastic cups. The walls were strong, holding in the jazz like a swimmer's breath; in artificial light Latinos sunk into cushioned seats and got their drink on. A din of boozy chatter: networking show business, seeing who's there to see, flaunting a date way wayyy out of their league.

This staircase in the corner brought you up from jazz, into hip-hop heaven. People weren't just standing around watching off-the-clock choreographers introducing the newest combination. Music was coming from the wall-high speakers, DJ's taking turns turning. It was MC yah that's him with the old school rap, it was MC damn that's nice with the down south ghetto sound, it was MC from every other Thursday with the hardcore this and the gangsta that.

This level up, Black cats were break-dancing on a plank wood stage an inch off the carpet. The walls were strong, holding in the hip-hop like a reverberating orgasm about to blow; in half-darkness dread-locked men

in two and three hooded sweatshirts jumped right, then left, slithering in circles. A mass of wet bodies: tripping into the latest step, repeating it, listening to the bass rumbling.

The Black girl left the carpet and shimmied onto the plank stage in a fire-red dress over jeans. She pulled the dress up over her hips and the men blinked and glanced back. It was a reflex. Yes, there were jeans up under there, but for all those times they'd seen a girl pull a dress up over her hips, and for all those times they'd been the one doing the pulling, they looked back. The Black girl was just trying to cool off, give her legs some room. She pushed into the center of the floor and closed her eyes and thought about the man she wanted.

The White boy never saw the dress come up. All he could see were blurry figures swaying around him. He had his glasses in the pocket of his T-shirt under a flannel and a windbreaker because last month he'd almost lost them under someone's shoe. And he had a skullcap pulled down below his eyebrows. But, then he did see the Black girl. She was tall and her vague frame stood out from the people around her. She was doing this thing with her hips, vibrating them like she had a tambourine in her stomach or spiders crawling across her belly. All this he could see moving toward him in a collage of synchronized gray activity.

For a song they danced near each other, for each other, despite each other. Eyes open, she could just make out blue irises, freckles, unshaven chin in scattered flashes of light. Within myopic distance, he could just make out pink lips, cheekbones, skinny arms in scattered flashes of light. More people came onto the floor erasing the space between them until they were dancing together it seemed and then yes, they certainly were because he was suddenly between her legs, startling her, throwing her off beat. She turned and did the tambourine spider thing again so he leaned in close to feel what it felt like and then he was grinding his crotch up against her ass and she felt belt loops and buckles and solid thrill.

A shot rang out and they all thought it was the music until the record scratched and someone screamed and something fired again, blam, blam blam. And the racket was like some half-time show, explosions for the sake of noise, chaos for the sake of urgency. And the White boy pulled the Black girl to him and pushed her down onto the plank floor and hovered over her, tucking her up underneath him.

There were others down around them, crouching, squatting or spread flat, arms over heads, hands covering eyes. Still others were running and yelling in a frenzy, knocking away chairs and tables, crowding down the



staircase, disturbing a perfect rendition of Miles Davis' "Petits Machins" below. The Black girl scrunched up under the White boy, curled up tighter, trying to catch her breath. The White boy wrapped his arms around her, squeezed his hands in over her belly and just held her like that.

She was breathing fast, hyperventilating it seemed, chewing on the insides of her mouth, a frightened kitten curled in a ball on his lap. Then just as quickly, she was calming down, savoring the peculiar sensation of an authentic embrace, licking blood from her lips.

The lights flickered on, then off again. And someone, a DJ perhaps, stood up, stumbled into equipment and a song remnant piped out and the White boy's body jerked in time to the music. It was a reflex.

Zetta Elliott

played out

I guess I got played
again

not by a man
but a boy playing with women
the way a child plays with blocks
building us up
and knocking us down
surrounding himself with us
until we are his fortress
and he
(the giant)
is safe within
strong enough to topple us
with a careless flick
of his wrist or
his tongue

I guess I got played
again

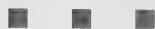
and I wonder
was it my bunions
or my cellulite
or the hairs sprouting from my chin
was it the whiteheads
or the too large pores
the slick of oil shining
along the bridge of my nose
was it my unshaved legs
or my untamed tongue
was I
too hard or
too smart or

too self-reliant
should I have been softer
sweeter
more eager to please?

at least he didn't walk off
wid alla my stuff
naw

I still got
my bunions and
my cellulite
and the coarse black hairs
curling out of my chin
I still got
my tongue
(soft on one side
serrate on the other)
and my beautiful mind
and my thighs that can squeeze
sweet juice
from a lime
I still got my politics and my ideas
('cause he never was feeling
those)
I can still compose
instant haiku
compress beauty and meaning
into 17 syllables

he kept all his words
for himself
could talk without end
about
his hopes and



his plans and
his righteous politics
but had no words left to ask
how I felt about the cancer
gnawing at my father's bones
yeah
I got played
again

letting myself be somebody else's
ATM
dispensing hugs
and comfort
and hour of attention
for what?

I am not the object
of his desire
I am not the object
of his curiosity
I am not the subject
of his poetry
I am not a subject
at all
I am an orifice
an ear
a hole
to be filled
with his essence
but whether you spit
or swallow
your mouth is still
empty
in the end
so maybe he did walk off
with some of my stuff
an ounce of my pride
a portion of my hope
and the last of my expectation

but I still got something left
yeah

and I'll be damned if I'll
sit here and smile
while he skips the apology
and goes straight to the lecture
on exactly what's wrong with
me

naw

I'll be the object
and the subject
of my OWN desire
'cause even if he doesn't
I still want me
with my bunions
and my moustache
and my colon that twists itself
into knots so tight
sometimes I can hardly breath
I want my fresh mouth
and my small breasts
and my bad attitude
and my high waist
and my big forehead
bulging with
inordinate
intelligence
and if that makes me
untouchable
so be it
'cause God gave me
ten strong fingers
and two soft palms
I can hold my own hand
and form my own fist
and massage my own clit
and write my own script
and right now the stage direction
reads:
ENTER WOMAN, *alone*

Maple Flagg

Hollering from the Inside, Yelling in Silence

Young

Hot in the ass and in a hurry to grow up
Ignorantly hitching a ride into womanhood
On a cold winters night, dark and lonely in the ghetto
Cass Corridor meeting places
Where new people gather
Where fates are changed
Where life bursts into flames
She met her nemesis

With a super fine face and in a deep satiny voice
He asked..."Do you want a ride?"
His juju eyes asked..."Do you want to fuck?"
Feeling herself transported into the latest episode of
Gidget and doing her best white girl imitation
"Thank you ever so, I'm about froze"
Is that something she would have said?
Am I acting too country?
Lofty ideas swimming in her mind
Climbing into the seat of her future

The streets poured by blurred in the night
Heat pouring out of the shiney black car
Making streams of smoke trailing behind
Bed room talk she didn't understand ruminated
In little girl flirts she licked up like a new kitten just weaned from
his mama
Grandiose ideas of a hip chick
Maybe high class whore and her loving pimp flashing through her mind
Chuckling to herself how grown up and glorious 14 can feel
And oh!...what a story she will tell her friends!
Further and further into the night and away from her world
The car speeding up and making for the dick boogie side of town
A nocturnal weapon of virginity destruction



Reality strikes like Big Ben at midnight
Bong!
Lost deep into the city
Fear and terror drains the blood from her skin
Flash backs of when she was 5 years old flooded in
When she was daddy's little girl cradled safe in his might
Handed over to a mustard whiskey wolf ton

She does as she's been told
Hollering from the inside
Don't!
I'm not ready
Through unseen tears and a shattered soul
Hollering from the inside
I didn't mean it
I saw those movies on TV
Yelling in silence, yelling in vain

He wore her like a contemporary sex toy
Just another piece of pussy tonight
Pistol penis shooting blanks and live rounds
Time and again into the body slave
Bullet sharp tongue darted from one entrance to another
Breaking down new doors, running amuck
Till her mind was full to the brim and ready to pop

Dropped at the door of cock roach city
Bursting the fantasy bubble of a little girls dreams
She grew old in one monkey shine rodeo ride
Come one come all; get your voo doo hoochie here
She placed no value on her jewelry after that
Her priceless gold, had tarnished to brass

Peter W. Fong

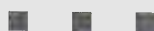
Principles of Navigation

To Rigger's astonishment, their outing with Daddy Owings seemed to kick off a month of good days. You name it, they caught it. Tarpon, bonefish, and permit inshore. Flag yellowtail, black grouper, and big mutton snappers on the reef. Sailfish, dolphin, and wahoo offshore, plus a juvenile swordfish that Bally spotted from the flybridge, sunning itself by a raft of flotsam. The radio popped all day long with reports of amazing or unusual catches: short-billed spearfish, blue marlin, mako sharks, rainbow runners. Every barstool had a theory. Some said it was the ordinary confluence of moon and tide, the spring upwelling that struck every year at this time. Others put their faith in El Nino, or chalked it up to an improvement in their fishing skills. A few said that this showed the effectiveness of net bans and gear restrictions, while the commercial boys argued that it was too soon for things like that to have any effect—and therefore the restrictions were unnecessary.

As word spread north, customers began to line the docks, pleading for charters. Business was so brisk that Pammie had to take over the shore operations. In the mornings, she delivered ice and beer and box lunches. During the day, she drove into Marathon for live mullet and frozen ballyhoo and a long list of replacement tackle. When the Clipper docked in the late afternoon, she sat under an umbrella and wrote reservations in a spiral notebook, snapped Polaroids of the clients with their fish, and ordered drinks from the tiki bar, making sure that the rookie waitress understood exactly what her crew was accustomed to.

Rigger felt as close to cheerful as he had in years. He'd always looked forward to fishing, of course, but even his dreams seemed less treacherous somehow. The anniversary of Mariel came and went without the usual urge for oblivion. They were booked during the day for sailfish, with a sunset trip for tarpon. By the time he'd finished mopping up, he was too tired to drink with real purpose. The Clipper had been chartered for twenty-one straight days. When Rigger closed his eyes in the shower, he could still feel the waves under his feet.

In the moments when his mind had room to wander, the main attraction was Jenna. Jenna at the helm of the Clipper, her blond hair streaming like a pennant. Jenna walking through a doorway, her fingers wrapped



around the neck of a rum bottle, backlit by the sun. Jenna with her eyes closed, her warm skin as smooth and soft as water. These images came to him unsolicited, like seabirds or sand dollars. And although the old ghosts had not completely given in, they seemed to lose some of their authority, and could only flash back and forth like teasers in her wake.

When Rigger thought of Hector dead, his friend did not offer a reproach. Not even once. It had been Carlita who said it was Rigger's fault, for doing what Hector wanted, but what else could he have done? Hector had offered to buy Reefhopper, then give it back upon his return from Mariel. "This is my main chance," he told Rigger. "No *mañanas*." He had one plan to avoid customs and immigration, and another to elude the Coast Guard's web of cutters, stationed in a grid pattern along the route from Key West. The feds had already impounded three boats and were threatening to seize more for transporting undocumented Cuban nationals. Three boats out of three thousand, but the threat was there and they knew all the rules, even if they chose to ignore them. But if Hector was willing to risk everything, then how could Rigger refuse him?

Hector argued that once Carlita hit the Keys, she would melt right in. And why not? She had some real advantages over the thousands of other refugees. She didn't look Cuban. She could speak English. And to Hector's knowledge, there was no law against transporting Chinese women with New Jersey driver's licenses, at least not anymore. Or not yet.

If only they had waited longer at Mariel, Rigger thought, things might have been different. Like everybody else, they would've run out of food and fuel. The local economy had depended on it. Both diesel and drinking water were going for three bucks a gallon, ham sandwiches for ten, chicken dinners for thirty, rum to the highest bidder. They would've rinsed their sweaty clothes in the harbor and strung them on the rigging to dry, played backgammon and cribbage, ridden out thunderstorms.

But the information they had gleaned was all bad. About twenty boats a day were getting out with cargo. The official ratio was four undesirables for every family member, but it was not uncommon for a deckload of refugees, accepted at gunpoint, to contain no relatives at all. "What happened to my mother, my father, my sister?" the hopefuls would ask. "I gave you their names." The official response was, "Maybe they went on another boat." Even the people who were lucky enough to grab a few of their kin did not get whole families. Mothers left children behind; husbands left wives.

By the time Reefhopper arrived, several hundred boats had already been waiting a full week. Some captains—their charters out of patience or money or both—were leaving empty. If Hector wanted to act sooner rather

than later, how could anyone blame him? Mariel wasn't the sort of place that inspired peace and tranquility. When the Soviets shipped missiles there, almost twenty years earlier, even Kennedy had wanted to push the button.

There were swarms of charter boats from the fishing and diving fleet, a knot of shrimpers and trawlers, and a horde of pleasure craft—motor yachts, cabin cruisers, and sailboats, along with some flimsy skiffs that Rigger wouldn't have trusted to cross a backwater slough, much less the Florida Straits. Boaters who tired of their soggy berths could pay for a ride to the dock, then pay again for a bus to the Triton Hotel in Havana. Before he went, Hector pointed to a meager spit of sand less than two hundred yards off Reefhopper's stern.

"Look for us there," he said. "Just after dark. Tonight or tomorrow."

Rigger considered the armed motor launches, the circling helicopters, the regular shore patrols. "You want me to beach her?"

"Are you crazy?" Hector laughed. "Just keep the engine running and throw us plenty of rope."

Later, Carlita said that Hector had found her late in the afternoon, waiting in a crowd of thousands outside the Immigration Office. She'd already been to her neighborhood Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, to get a letter explaining why she should be sent out of Cuba. The chairwoman refused to write one. So Carlita had forged a letter, the all-important document that declared herself an undesirable, a danger to Cuban society. She said that she'd known Hector would come for her and wanted to be ready. It was nothing but fate. Everything was bound to happen: Hector's voice shouting above the crowd, her mother's last tearful embrace, the long dark swim, her arms sculling backwards while she watched the shore, ready to duck beneath the surface when the searchlights came. She could see the back of Hector's head where it parted the water, and that too felt like fate. Then the rope was in her hands, her fingers through the loop Rigger had spliced in the bitter end. After she climbed aboard, the line snaked back out for Hector.

To Rigger, all of these events had seemed real enough at the time. It was the burp of automatic weapons that had sounded unreal. The splintery passage of lead through Reefhopper's fiberglass hull. And the accompanying shouts and laughter, like badly timed jokes. He felt keenly aware of his own silhouette bending at the transom, and then the glint of Hector's glasses above the water. He had seen the hand grab the loop. "Go," he heard Hector say. "Get us out of here."

Rigger crouched at the cockpit controls while the soldiers shouted again, their cries punctuated by more good-natured gunfire. He could smell

diesel fuel even before he hit the throttle. The hull seemed to crawl onto the plane, like an overweight pup from a backyard hole. The loose coils of rope fled smoothly over the transom, then the line came tight against the cleat. Hector may have grunted then, although Rigger couldn't possibly have heard this above the engine. Peeking over the stern, he could see the wake breaking first at Hector's fists and then around his head and shoulders—a strangely familiar sight. Years ago, when it was still legal to hunt conchs, Rigger and Donnie had invented a game called the Human Ski. Ordinarily they used the boat to pull each other slowly over a shallow patch of sand and reef, so that the swimmer had time to spot conchs, then dive down and retrieve them. But occasionally one of them would punch the throttle and the guy in the water would suddenly find himself planing like a surfboard. There were two choices: you could let go, and wait for the boat to circle to retrieve you, or flip onto your back, so the water would rush up and over your head, creating a little cavern of air for you to breathe. It was like standing underneath a waterfall while someone yanked your arms out of their sockets. Both men thought this was great fun.

Who knows what Hector was thinking, but he held on. As soon as the gunfire died down, Rigger throttled back to idle and began to haul him in, hand over hand in the dark. From the weight on the line, Rigger could tell that Hector wasn't swimming. Carlita shivered on deck, calling his name. When the time came, Rigger reached over and grabbed the wrists, as thin and bony as his own. Together, he and Carlita pulled Hector from the water. His glasses were gone and his eyes were shut tight. When his body bent double over the transom, water gushed from his mouth.

They had to pry his fingers from the splice. While Carlita pressed her mouth against Hector's, Rigger placed both palms on the breastbone, one atop the other, and pushed, sixty times a minute. Every five seconds, Rigger would pause while Carlita delivered a breath. Neither spoke. At regular intervals, Carlita would signal for Rigger to stop while she pressed two fingers to the side of Hector's neck. Then they both would begin again.

When the searchlight found them, Rigger crouched again at the controls, full throttle now, until they had cleared the narrow neck of the bay and gained open water. Carlita kept at it alone for a time, kneeling beside Hector's left shoulder, alternating from his lips to his chest. Her movements were precise and mechanical, like one of those little toy birds that sip endlessly from a glass without ever draining the water. Rigger kept watch for the lights of pursuers, but the only boats he saw were headed toward the harbor, straggling into Cuban waters in loose groups of three or four.

The next time he looked back, Carlita was sitting on deck with her legs stretched out before her. She had pulled Hector's head into her lap, as if he were only sick, or sleeping. A few minutes later, the engine quit. A couple of doubtful coughs, then nothing but the sighs of wind and water. Rigger twisted the key a few times; switched to the auxiliary tank and tried again. The motor rumbled back to life, and then he remembered their perforated hull. He shone a flashlight along the port side and counted the entrance holes. There were at least a half-dozen, more than one near the waterline. He pulled the hatch to check the bilge. Not much water, but a powerful sheen of diesel, as the leaking fuel sloshed back and forth before the bilge pumps kicked on.

In those days, Reefhopper didn't have gauges. To check the fuel levels, Rigger would drop a long wooden dowel into each tank until it hit bottom, then reckon what was left in inches, not gallons. He could feel Carlita's eyes on his back as he measured both tanks. The main was dry, but the auxiliary was nearly full. That meant they had about nine hours at cruising speed.

He had been headed roughly north-northeast, figuring on picking up the Sand Key Light, then turning for home along the reef. He hadn't counted on running short of fuel, but knew already that they did not want to be towed into Key West to face the feds. If that happened, Carlita would end up in a reception center somewhere—Truman Annex or Tamiami Park. Hector would be wheeled into Monroe County morgue. As for himself, he would be jailed on any number of counts, from transporting illegal immigrants to involuntary manslaughter.

Since the gulfstream moved from west to east through the Florida Straits, the current was in their favor. And with the wind out of the southwest, they would have a following sea. Rigger actually thought they might make it. But then again, he wasn't really thinking straight. It had been all he could do to stay penned in Mariel with the rest of the crowd, watching the dark water for a crease, a splash. Although there were ten times as many new arrivals, it was the departing boats that he kept his eye on, the ones that were getting away—with or without what they came for. Some of the soldiers made the refugees brush the Cuban soil from their shoes before boarding. As soon as they cleared the pier, those same refugees flung their shoes into the harbor. Rigger thought he could sympathize. On Hector's first night ashore, he had kept the engine idling until midnight. The next morning, he tried to decide what to do if Hector didn't turn up. It was thirsty work, and he wore out most of a bottle of Havana Club before resolving not to consider the possibility. He liked Hector well enough then, but



the respect came afterwards, when Rigger had considered more fully what Hector was able to do for love. And what he himself wasn't.

Hector had been a better friend than most because Aileen had liked him too. He had always been good to them, and they in turn had never given him the chance to do otherwise. But on that night, all of Hector's problems had come to an end. Contemplating a ten-hour crossing with nine hours of fuel, Rigger told himself that he couldn't afford grief. He watched as Carlita removed Hector's shirt and shorts, emptied the pockets, then tossed the wet clothes overboard. In the dim glow of the running lights, she walked her fingertips over Hector's entire body, as if she were searching for some hidden mechanism, a switch or a lever. Then she kissed his cold lips.

Although they had entered the shipping lanes, where freighters passed the night on autopilot, Rigger shut the engine down. He ducked into the cuddy and pulled the sheet off what had been, only hours ago, Hector's bunk. Carlita was sitting astride the body when he came out.

"He has no wounds," she said.

Rigger held out the sheet. "We should cover him."

She took the shroud from his hands, then let it fall onto the deck. "Do you know," she said slowly, "that he never once made love to me?"

There was something frightening in her voice. No hint of sorrow, just dissatisfaction, or resentment, along with a grim note of curiosity. She swung herself off his body and knelt alongside him, as if she were ready to resume mouth-to-mouth. Rigger had the sudden desire to shield Hector, to protect him somehow, but it was too late. When she touched him, stroked him, Rigger could almost feel her hands on his skin.

That's what he was thinking as he ate. But calmly this time, without the old terror. The three of them were having a late dinner at Joe's: T-bones and onion rings, ketchup and horseradish, rum and tonic. And a glass of milk for Pammie, who was saying how much she admired Kara Shoji. It was Kara who had saved them from Easter's ordinary misery, along with all the other potential miseries that Daddy Owings could inflict. During their last round of holiday cocktails, when he'd practically begged for her company at Derby Day, she'd swung the fighting chair to face him, slowly, like someone used to sitting behind the big desk. She said that she'd have to check with her superiors, but she was certain some useful business could be conducted on that occasion. And then she'd smiled, one hand lifted to hide her face. You could almost see Daddy Owings sit up, as if somebody had waved a big juicy bone in the air.

Rigger marveled at the ease with which his thoughts moved from Carlita to Kara, from Kara alone to the unlikely twosome she made with Daddy Owings, and then on to the hope and promise this represented for other improbable events. Jenna, for instance. It was like some fresh trail had been blazed in his head, a new route that short-circuited the familiar path of guilt and disgust. Maybe it was the shock that made him pause for a moment, with a mouthful of steak, but when he bit down the pain was lightening. He could feel the shards of the broken tooth with his tongue, the saltier taste of his own blood mixed with meat and horseradish.

Bally said that it looked like a kick in the groin, the way Rigger's head snapped back. While Pammie smiled apologetically at the adjoining table, Rigger walked to the bathroom holding a napkin to his mouth, and pondering the future. They were booked for the next three days with a real-estate developer from Tampa, one of the newly rich who tipped big but couldn't help watching anxiously as you crumpled the bills into your pocket. Rigger rinsed his mouth in the sink, then fished out what looked to be the biggest fragment. A heart could be repaired; a carburetor replaced. But what about a tooth? He tested the pain with his tongue. It was still there.



Anne Marie Fowler

Drink the Bones of My Memory

I leave you my body when I die.
Whittle it down to bone; leave no flesh
to saturate the beauty of the skeleton.
Take my chest bone; paint on it the tears
you cried as a child to remind you
of breasts grown weary from bearing
the world's selfishness, the colossal orbs
that clapped your ears against the rank rhetoric
of society. Save the index finger. Dip it into indigo ink.
Write with it the imagination of words
inscribed across your forehead in the sleepy
rise of night.
Raise my pelvic bone to your ear and hear
the drumming of birth and life.
The rest, burn to a fine ash. Take half and fling it
toward the rising sun off the shore of Galacia.
And the remainder—
pepper a little in your juice
each morning.
and drink the bones of my memory.

Gilbert Gardiner

Zevia

They say it lies in the far west, toward the sunset, across the desert, across swamps and rivers deep and wide; beyond sandstorms and thunderstorms; beyond robbers and wild beasts; entirely surrounded by the Hammerrock Mountains—a ten thousand foot wall of granite, snow, and freezing winds. Only a few had made the journey. Most succumbed to exhaustion. And none returned to tell the experience. But the fact that none returned didn't prevent the people in the distant towns from earnestly desiring to migrate there—and not by ass, but by foot; for asses, they said, were prone to Nag flies which swarmed the Ongoro Swamps and injected in their bite a parasite that gnawed on the hearts of all beasts of burden.

Every so often, someone would leave for the west—an occasion for great merriment and feasting in the town. It was all they talked about—these townsfolk. Indeed, every aspect of their lives—their laughter, tears, sighs, disputes—even the dreams they had at nights, dreams that made them sing so sweetly in the morning—was bound up in it. Not that they *had* to migrate there—for the people in these towns were of a strong constitution and lived long lives, full of ease and prosperity. On Sundays they gathered in church to read the same verses: “Blessed are we in the city and blessed are we in the field. Blessed are the fruit of our womb and the fruit of our ground and the fruit of our animals, the offspring of our cattle and the young of our flock. Blessed are our basket and our kneading bowl. Blessed are we when we come in and blessed are we when we go out.” But these blessings were not enough. There was more to be had. Much more. So from boys with kites to girls with dolls, from drunks in taverns to lawyers in court, from prostitutes to preachers—every day they cried: Zevia! O Zevia! Land of Wealth! Land of Youth!

They said Zevia had no pollution; its waters, soil, and air were of such that everything grew to four or five times its usual size—which meant that roses were as big as cabbages, grapes as plums, and chickens as turkeys. They said the climate in Zevia was salubrious—a perpetual spring—with lakes and streams that received their pristine waters from underground. They said gold in Zevia was as common and as costly as dust. As for food, they said in Zevia children bathed in milk, their parents in wine; that harvests of wheat and barley were so bounteous, the mounds of butter, eggs,



and beef so high, that the sun would be darkened, casting a great shadow for miles. They said there was no night in Zevia and that the people there never died.

These were the thoughts that prevailed in the towns; Bazedoria, Nel, Thaxix, Vifturey, Mawret, and Givceder. To speak anything less of Zevia, to say, for instance, that there were worms in Zevian apples, or that Zevian men beat their wives, or much worse, that the drink *Beautiful* given to weary immigrants to Zevia did not bestow everlasting life would cause one to be guilty of distorted reasoning; a most *horrible* fancy, indeed; and would be grounds to lock one away in the asylum for a few months, until the mind cleared and reason restored.

The last person to depart to Zevia was Isaac, a farmer from Thaxix. It was fifteen minutes after midnight in June when the bells began ringing for Isaac. Normally, for matters of legislature or religion, when the elders of Thaxix were summoned behind the closed doors of the church, only one bell would ring. But on that morning, all six bells were ringing.

Lying in their beds, the people listened. They had been jarred from sleep by the thunderous sound. Was someone departing? Only two weeks ago the bells had rung for Nester, his wife, son, and mother-in-law, whose departing was still the talk of the town. Could it be? It can't be! It's a rogue with a hankering! A little rogue wants to turn us into dupes! Yes, it had happened before, but not now. Truly, once again, someone was departing.

O blessed, blessed day! A torrent of excitement, a great hullabaloo, as all Thaxix began scuttling around like agitated bees, packing whatever food and supplies they could for the family, a now illustrious family—preimmortal, preeminent, blessed forever. To not bring anything was a breach of duty, punishable by flogs and confinement in the asylum. No one was excluded, not even the children. But such a bold violation of law rarely happened, and everyone felt the punishment was fair since it guaranteed that the spirit of giving would never die. Why, the people of Thaxix held generosity as the highest virtue, for which they were well-known.

The family would need at least a month's supply of food and water, among other things. Normally, if there were no perils along the way, the journey to Zevia took nine days. To not expect perils, however, was foolish as there are *always* dangers on the path to Zevia, dangers that could lengthen the journey for weeks, maybe months. But who knew for sure? No one had returned to tell. Tradition, nonetheless, demanded that the departing family be bountifully supplied with the necessities of life. Tradition also demanded that the family *carry* these necessities; for though the town would provide a wagon, they would be taken no further than the edge

of the Devil's Porch—a desert, eighteen miles long, infested with scorpions, rattlesnakes, and the carcasses of the dead. Whoever was departing had to be taken there by two o'clock, long before the sun became a furnace and traveling, a curse.

They gathered in the town square under light of the moon. Had there been no moonlight, they would've used lanterns. They bore sacks of potatoes, corn, cured meats, eggs, crackers, apples. Those who had no food to give brought soap, rum, sulfur, coal—anything that would add to the comfort of the family. The magistrate, dressed in a judicial gown and court hat, was standing on the platform—along with Isaac, who wore his usual hat and overalls. Standing at the front of the crowd was Isaac's family: his wife, Barbara, and his children Tim, Jude, David, and Melissa. Tim, the eldest, was sixteen and Melissa, the youngest, four. The magistrate began to speak.

"Noble citizens of Thaxix, honorable friends from neighboring towns, you have been summoned once again to celebrate a most wonderful event—the departure of our beloved Isaac." The crowd cheered jubilantly. "I call it wonderful because soon he will join those who have gone before him in a land I dare say is as fair as heaven, a land void of want, void of night, a land far removed from the vicissitudes of life, having neither pain nor regret, sickness nor sorrow; yea, a land offering the consummate blessing: the drink, Beautiful, giver of everlasting life! Ah, Beautiful," the magistrate was joined by the crowd in the solemn expression "how long shall it be ere I drink thee?"

"Perhaps you are wondering," continued the magistrate, "why the wife and children of our dear Isaac are not here on the platform. That is because they are not going with him." The crowd gasped. Why was he leaving his family behind? Such a thing had never been done! Families should depart together! How unseemly and unwise! The magistrate raised his hand. "Be at peace. As you all know, the path to Zevia is fraught with danger. For the safety and consolation of his wife and children, Isaac will go before them, to prepare the way—clearing the path of all unnecessary ills, that they may travel in relative ease and, upon arriving in Zevia, find sweet rest in the comforts of a home, whose architect and builder will be Isaac himself. So be calmed, and put aside your restive grumblings. Yet a little while and Isaac's family will depart—accompanied by one whose heart we know is the very *essence* of goodness—Nehemias Thorpe, our very own clergyman, brother-in-law of Isaac!" A magnanimous roar of applause from the crowd. "And so I will delay Isaac no further, but hastily send him on with joy, feasting, and the embrace of dance and song to..." He raised his arms and, with the people, shouted with a resounding exuberance, "Zevia! O Zevia! Land of Wealth! Land of Youth!"



The celebration lasted an hour, time enough for each person to give Isaac a gift and a kiss; and once the gifts were presented, to eat wild boar and yams, drink whisky and ale. Amidst their eating and drinking, there was laughter, music, fireworks, and many gentle discourses about the west—of the promise it gave; new life, pure and undefiled. Then it was time for the dance. The violinists played, and the people waltzed in the streets, dressed in their nightgowns; their movements so lithe, so graceful, they appeared as specters beneath the silvery moonlight. Even the children drank and danced.

Yet for all their mirth, for all their merriment, the people were not without restraint. They knew the rules. Upon the hour, precisely, the violins ceased, the dancers separated, and the people ran happily to their homes, leaving behind the fragments of a memory, fragments that spoke of yet another celebration of life.

As said previously, like all immigrants to Zevia Isaac was taken to the edge of the Devil's Porch. He knew the route he had to take, having learned it as a child in school. Using a compass as a guide, he would travel west across the desert, then northwest to avoid the more dense regions of the Ongoro Swamps. After passing through the swamps, he would cross the rivers of Cerce. He would then travel south along the banks until he arrived at a place where the rivers met. Hereafter, he would travel west toward the Hammerrock Mountains, behind which lay Zevia.

He began his journey with a jug of water, two smoked hams, dried figs, raisins, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of wine. Most of the goods he left for his family—to meet their needs and to lessen his load for an easier passage. Besides, he had an array of survival skills; he knew how to hunt, build a fire, set traps, find water.

He was rugged, strapping, with large hands and a broad chest. He had excellent vision, keen hearing, and good, strong teeth. Indeed, as far as he could remember, he, unlike anyone he knew in Thaxix (or any other town for that matter), had never been sick. And it was this—a keen sense of his own brawn—that drove him onward.

He traveled quickly, stopping once to adjust the articles in his saddlebag and twice to eat. The moon was full and the sky clear—a blessing while traveling at night. About four o'clock, a time when he should still be crossing the desert, Isaac encountered something strange.

There, in the midst of the desert, was a town.

A very bizarre-looking town, with only one street, parallel to which are long bunkhouses stacked precariously on top of each other—three stories high and too decrepit for habitation. The wood is rotten, support beams

are collapsing, and every now and then he gets a whiff of it: an odor, rank and musty like a slaughterhouse. On the balconies are old, broken rocking chairs. Scattered throughout are tall cottonwood trees dried up from the roots. Here, the curse of god is strong, for not even weeds have found rest.

A moderate breeze begins to drag a tumbleweed down the street. The singles creak eerily. The rocking chairs rock. Isaac wonders. The architecture is, indeed, odd. There are three evenly-spaced doors on the first floor of every building. The windows are slits, permitting only films of moonlight. Narrow, labyrinthine alleys—grotesquely dark with overhanging cobwebs, echoing the sound of squealing rats—connect the seemingly endless rows of bunkhouses.

There appears to be no grocery store, barbershop, or post office. No church. Not even a tavern. “Must be some old mining town,” Isaac says. “They must’ve found something *real* precious if they didn’t have time for one little drink.” He decides to continue his journey, but his foot hits something hard and he looks down.

He see them—hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them, strewn on the street. He kneels and strikes a match. They’re lumps of metal, dull yellow and heavy. He strikes another match, but this time making a small fire with sticks, paper, and pieces of wood. He takes a stone and smashes a lump. It flattens. He scratches another with his pocketknife. It carves. “Well I’ll be...” He finds a burlap bag. They say there’s gold in Zevia—like dust. But a bird in hand is worth two in the bush. He fills the bag till it holds no more. Realizing he needs a handle for the bag in order to carry it, he removes some of the nuggets and thrusts them into his pockets.

Yet it is strange. Why would the people leave all this gold behind? “Is anyone here?” he shouts. No one answers. A confirmation that this mass of wealth is his. But the gold and the saddlebag are difficult to carry. Maybe if he could find a place to readjust the weight...But then—maybe he shouldn’t go on to Zevia. Maybe he should stay here and bag the nuggets. He could start now and when his wife and children and brother-in-law arrive—they could bag the rest. And then, what need would there be for Zevia? Owner of such a vast storehouse of gold, he could build a town ten times better than Zevia! He sighs. But what would it profit him if he were to have all this wealth and still be mortal, still prone to misfortune, pain, and ageing? Ah, Beautiful, fairest beverage, giver of life. Choosing between gold and life—Isaac ponders momentarily, then chooses life—but along with a cumbersome burlap bag that still needs some readjusting.

He walks toward the town square at the far end of the street, stopping once in a while to catch a breath and switch shoulders. Like Thaxix, the



square has a wooden platform, behind which is a bell tower with six bells. But here the platform is decaying with loose boards and gaping holes, and the bells—leaning toward the macabre in their misery—bear deep cracks and encrusted rust.

Isaac ascends the platform. On it stands a large jug filled with a liquid of some sort. He smells the liquid, tastes it. Water! He quenches his thirst. The jug is heavy—and smooth, smoother than anything he has ever felt. He strikes a match. The jug is silver, bewitchingly elegant—with a handsomely written inscription that says *Beautiful*. It is the perfect gift for his wife.

Isaac empties the rest of the water and tries to force the jug into his burlap bag, but it won't fit. "Godammit!" He tries forcing it in his saddlebag, but still it won't fit. Then he has an idea. He removes one of his bootlaces and ties the jug to his waist. Now he is ready to continue the journey.

But the burden of the gold, the saddlebag, and the jug is too great, even for Isaac. His legs buckling, his face taut, he struggles to stand upright—summoning the use of every muscle. The platform groans. He will have to leave something behind. Certainly, it won't be the gold. Neither will it be the jug. He hoists the gold over his shoulder, leaving the saddlebag on the platform. It would be foolish to trade a king's ransom for ham, dried fruit, bread, and wine. It is then that the bells begin to ring.

O blessed, blessed day! The doors of the bunkhouses tear open and out they come with dust, swarms of them, in haste, running or limping or crawling toward the town square. They encircle the platform, smiling at Isaac, not speaking, just smiling—mothers cuddling their babies, drunks holding beer mugs, girls with dolls, expectant women, farmers, lawyers, blacksmiths, barbers, grocers, physicians. Some of them are gaunt; some pale and deathly looking; some with dark sunken eyes and blackened teeth. Some are missing limbs, some appear normal, and some are too bandaged to describe. "Excuse me. Excuse me. Pardon." It is a man, pushing his way through the crowd. He is dressed in a judicial gown and court hat, no doubt the town magistrate. He ascends the stairs of the platform, inspects Isaac's hands sharply, then addresses the crowd.

"Noble citizens, you have been summoned once again to celebrate a most wonderful event—the arrival of our beloved Isaac." The crowd cheers jubilantly. "I call it wonderful because, as you all know, soon he will join those who have gone before him in a land they say is as fair as heaven, a land void of want, void of night, a land far removed from the vicissitudes of life, having neither pain nor regret, sickness nor sorrow. Except that this is not so, for as you can see, we here are in dire straits. Yes, we have gold and silver, but what good is gold and silver in light of our situation? Yes, we

have everlasting life, but what good is this if we are still flesh, still prone to misfortune, pain, and ageing? But we shall not be ungrateful. To those who come here," he turns and looks mockingly at Isaac, "seeking the consummate blessing—ah, *immigrants, immigrants*," the magistrate is joined by the crowd in the solemn expression, "to thee and thee alone do we owe our days."

"What is this place?" Isaac says. But no one answers him.

"I know you are all wondering," continues the magistrate, "why the wife and children of our dear Isaac are not here on the platform. That is because he has not brought them." The crowd gasped. Why did he leave his family behind? Such a thing had never been done! Families should depart together! How unseemly and unwise! The magistrate raises his hand.

"Be at peace. As you all know, the path to Zevia is considered fraught with danger. For the safety and consolation of his wife and children, Isaac has gone before them, to prepare the way—expecting to clear the path of all unnecessary ills, that they may travel in relative ease; and, upon arriving in Zevia, find sweet rest in the comforts of a home, whose architect and builder will be Isaac himself. So be calmed, and put aside your restive grumblings. Yet a little while and Isaac's family will depart—accompanied by one whose heart we know is the very *essence* of goodness—Nehemias Thorpe, clergyman of Thaxix, brother-in-law of Isaac!" A magnanimous roar of applause from the crowd.

"How do you know these things? Why are you talking like this? Answer me, goddammit!" Still clinging to his bag of gold, Isaac tries to grab the magistrate's gown but loses his balance when his foot sinks deep into the rotten wood.

"And so, I will delay Isaac no further, but hastily receive him with joy, feasting, and the embrace of dance and song in..." The magistrate raises his arms and, with the people, shout with a resounding exuberance, "Zevia! O Zevia! Land of Wealth! Land of Youth!"

The celebration lasted an hour, time enough for the people to pull Isaac to the ground and take whatever organs they lacked. Distributions were not random but based on need and length of time waiting. Not everyone needed organs; most of them came to watch—and learn. It was a fine specimen. No part of it would be wasted.

The more vital organs were given to the sickest among them. The skin was divided among a family with scalded backs. The hands were for the magistrate. Of late, his own had grown stiff and achy—beginnings of a perpetual rheumatism. The eyes were given to Mr. Coppins, the oldest person in the town, who lay wrapped in lamb's wool on the third floor of one

of the buildings. He was two hundred years old, cadaverous, and very finicky—refusing a pair of eyes if they were not light brown.

Once the organs were harvested, the gold tossed back to the street, and the jug *Beautiful* filled and replaced, the people ate wild boar and yams, drank whisky and ale. Amidst their eating and drinking, there was laughter, music, fireworks, and many gentle discourses about the east—of the promise it gave; new life, pure and undefiled. Then it was time for the dance. The violinists played, and the people waltzed in the street, dressed in their nightgowns; their movements so lithe, so graceful, they appeared as specters beneath the silvery moonlight. Even the children drank and danced.

Yet for all their mirth, for all their merriment, the people were not without restraint. They knew the rules. Upon the hour, precisely, the violins ceased, the dancers separated, and the people ran happily to their homes, leaving behind the fragments of a memory, fragments that spoke of yet another celebration of life.

Jose Gonzalez

Stealing Shakespeare

Winking while rubbing his Elizabethan beard
Like an Aladdin lamp ready to grant him a
Sonnet, Shakespeare dared me to steal him.

A diamond shaped face, jewel, staple bible of
English, smiled piled on Grapes of Wrath,
Burning on Fahrenheit 451, hard cover,
Wrapped in cloth, dared me to steal him.

The principal's rule book screamed at me that afternoon,
Warning me to principle myself, but the shouts of
Caliban, trapped inside that tenth grade
Classroom boomed, made me forget a bandit's
Doom, reminded me that at sixteen, the only
Latino in that college-level course,
The only student whose notebook spoke poor
Working blue collar Spanish,
Twas I.

I needed to steal their books.



Melissa Gonzalez

Words

My words are stronger than that punch you throw for honor.

Stronger than that drink you sip for courage.

My words are real like that kiss given for affection,
not later expectations.

My words last longer than bruises caused by fear.

Nights of regret.

My words remind you of the otherwise forgotten.

They open minds.

My words heal wounds

My words bring tears to deserts.

My words bring strength, anger and fear wrapped in a smile.

Lit by understanding.

My words bring Me.

Robert E. Hayes

Cross Words

*It was a terrible [movie] except John Wayne. But it was a story!
It was a story! Goddammit people are sick of all this weird stuff.*

—Richard M. Nixon tapes

Morgan watched halfheartedly while the handcuffed brother's sullen mug flickered across the screen, tight little Latrell Sprewell braids overshooting his head, five seconds of infamy—busted by Chicago cops for an armored car holdup. In one of those “finally tonight” bits, the toothy young woman reading the news reported that the hapless brother had dropped a book at the crime scene. Smiling beatifically, she aimed to evoke ironic laughter and send viewers to bed chortling with self-righteous assurance; they were, after all, citizens who played by the rules, hustling off to work every day, hardly in the same boat with a bone-headed criminal. Vying for Miss Congeniality or, at minimum, first runner-up, she closed with a lame book/crook pun that triggered compliant laughter from the weatherman and sports guy, both of whom then posed and preened for the camera as horns and cellos chimed in. “Thank you, goodnight everybody,” she sang out over the music.

On the sofa next to Morgan, Jan sat engrossed in a cross-stitching pattern, head tucked as if to dodge blinking electron rays shooting from the tube, nimble fingers busy generating countless intricate X-shaped stitches. Kicking back with a cold can of Old Milwaukee, ceding a narrow stretch of his mind to the news, Morgan looked forward to the next morning, the writer's workshop he signed up for in the Loop. His maiden voyage into the rolling sea of workshops. How different it all was in those halcyon summer days before 9-11 when the TV fed us story after story of children attacked by sharks. Sharks everywhere. This offbeat crime news was a welcome break from the grim news of Bush's war in Iraq. Morgan recalled reading in *Harper's* that falling televisions killed more children annually than sharks, though he had to admit one seldom spotted a television lurking in the waters off the beaches in North America.

“First day of school,” he said, mimicking Mike Tyson's wacky falsetto, “suppose they don't like me.”

Jan smiled, and then from deep in her throat came that beguiling feathery laugh. The sound no one else hears, darting like quicksilver through his heart. Morgan subscribed to the sentiment that if you can make them laugh, you can make them come. In the end, both effusions flow bounteously from the same joyful wellspring.

"She didn't mention the book title," he complained.

"What book is that honey?"

He's a labor lawyer on the union side. She's a program analyst for a major corporation, an IT specialist on an AS/400 server. This woman, whom he likes to call Precious, laughs at his *bon mots*, says he has a cock-eyed world view, negative sometimes, but usually politically astute. Morgan has not ruled out jumping the broom.



It was just after nine when he climbed up the subway steps. Then the half-mile trek east to the eighteen-story limestone building nestled among kindred structures like so many tired gray crones, unbending, dirt-caked, standing tall unabashedly, the legacy of early skyscraper modernity. Morgan rode up on the elevator, but its shaky rattle induced the firm resolve to walk down when class ended. The austere musty little classroom was all peeling paint, superannuated wood and heating vents clogged with petrified dust bunnies. Abjectly charmless, but it signaled a no-nonsense approach to literary insight, finally he would be among people serious about transmuting the truth using words on paper. No telling what he might learn. His prospects, if not ablaze in sunlight, now seemed less hazy and Morgan felt exhilarated, as if he'd picked the Kentucky Derby winner at 7-1 odds.

In a tight semicircle the seven strangers waited their turn to introduce themselves, to say a little about themselves, like contestants on *Jeopardy*, four women, three men and Artie, the workshop instructor. When it was Morgan's turn, a student wearing a maroon and white Harvard sweatshirt (old enough to be his dad) asked if he was correct in assuming Morgan was *not* on the management side of labor. "The labor field ought to provide you a wealth of material," the inquisitor declared and nodded knowingly.

Morgan hadn't planned to talk shop and barely smiled at the presumptuous classmate, letting the sheen in his eyes dim and nearly flicker out.

The other man looked a few years older than Morgan. Clinching an unlit pipe in his teeth, he wore Sony headphones over curly dark Pete Sampras hair. When Artie entered, he opened his coat and quickly dropped the pipe in the inside pocket. Then he removed the headphones and dropped them into his backpack. Tilting his head attentively, he crossed his legs and leaned forward.

Two of the women, early thirties, carried on with an easy warmth that marked them as old friends experiencing the workshop together. Their gestures and diffident smiles, oddly alike, bespoke a willingness to please and, above all, a pressing need to be liked.

A brown-eyed, pleasingly plump woman, easily the youngest, sat on the end nearest the window digging furiously in her purse, twitching like a skittish cat, seemingly upset that some sought-after item eluded her. Though not yet summer, she wore shorts.

Sylvia Plath had the chair to Morgan's right. At least she resembled photos he'd seen, the square bittersweet face, the pudgy nose, the 50s hair complete with bangs. If someone in the group had already published something, he'd bet she was the one.

Artie announced that he would read an excerpt from *Crime and Punishment* and pass the novel around so each person could read a paragraph or two. Pallid, late forties, he wore a checked shirt with retro black/white high-top Converse gym shoes. Sporting a misbehaving salt and pepper beard, he doggedly affected a derelict-cum-writer visage. Flipping pages, Artie found his place, and then began with 7-year-old Raskolnikov's dream scene.

The kid's strolling with his father near a tavern where a mob of rowdy drunks has gathered. The boy watches the mob senselessly beating an old mare owned by a lowlife named Miklolka. They're beating it with whips and sticks mercilessly about the face and eyes. Finally Miklolka kills it with a crowbar blow to the head. All the while someone's playing balalaika, drunks are singing and a fat ruddy peasant woman's laughing and cracking nuts. At this point Artie stopped reading. "See that, see that," he chanted, eyeing his charges piously, like some backwater preacher. Three times he interrupted himself with "see that," asking them what they got out of the reading, what they saw, what they heard.

Not surprisingly, the robber's book drop had become stuck to the roof of Morgan's brain. He wanted to make something of that blotched transgression, work it into a story. "If you can't do the time, don't leave the tome," he told himself, smiling at his own pun. What was it, some faddy tale like that home-girl who got her groove back? In Chicago, one seldom encounters a black man reading in public. Call it anti-intellectualism, afraid of appearing vulnerable, none of the above. Who knows? But whenever Morgan spotted this anomaly, he discretely checked it out. Whites did it also. When Morgan takes a book to lunch, he'll occasionally catch Joe Suburb breaking his neck, tripping over his eyeballs to scope the cover. *He reads, how different.*

After the *Crime and Punishment* dream scene, Artie turned to a story by Flannery O'Connor entitled "Parker's Back." Parker's pregnant wife has settled on the front porch snapping beans and Artie again said, "See that, hear it, snap, snap." Pausing, he lets his face turn Jimmy Swaggart supercilious and then continued the narrative. An elderly woman has hired Parker to work on her tractor, but when it breaks down on his second day, she sarcastically remarks to a "nigger" working nearby that Parker breaks everything he touches.

Morgan, the lone brother in the otherwise monochromatic semicircle, didn't flinch though he was not pleased. \$400 for six Saturdays of this? How much machinery could one worker break in two days, he wondered, readily dismissing the old woman's blathering exaggeration.

After Artie finished his piece Morgan spoke up and advanced his considered opinion that O'Connor was quaint and *passe*, while he admitted that he'd enjoyed *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *The Geranium*, baring his soul like some 12-step program for frustrated apprentice writers. When Artie shot him down saying he wasn't teaching a comparative lit class, Morgan let his face go as blank as if he were listening to Farsi with zero comprehension.

Morgan had written and submitted twelve stories, teetering any day now (or so he believed) on a breakthrough, his debut, as it were. Hoping to set sail with a hearty crew of writers, he longed to talk shop, explore the craft, thirsted for contact with other writers. Instead, there he sat drawn into a tight semicircle, treading water on a Saturday morning with the Pete Sampras guy who was just then confessing that he only listened to Books on Tape.

Christ! Artie should tell the poor devil he has to see the words. Hemingway's rant, recalled in *A Moveable Feast*, comes to mind, told to a compatriot in a Paris café after he repeatedly interrupted young Papa at work: "Get a job. Hang yourself. Only don't talk about it. You could never write."



The "L" carrying Morgan home rumbled along like an ancient steel ophidian, fast enough to run you down yet slow enough to permit escape, provided you sidestepped the lethal third rail. The dropped book was playing his mind like a game of three-card monte.

Two months after the armored car heist, police traced the bumbling thief by lifting his prints off the book. In jail they take away a prisoner's belt and shoelaces, but why confiscate a book? Evidence of what? Dust it for prints and return it for God's sakes. An amusing proposition, but of course Morgan knew better.

Mulling this around, his mind slipped into a random selection and landed on bumbling Inspector Clouseau—*A Shot in the Dark*, the movie. The beautiful Maria Gambrelli (Elke Sommer) encouraging Clouseau's daffy exploits, traipsing about seductively, ever ready to shuck her maid's apron to coo, kiss and cuddle the screwball detective. Life imitating art. The armored car job snookered from a Blake Edwards Pink Panther script.

It was half past noon when the train slowed for a stop at Ashland Avenue. To the left, on Harrison Street stands infamous Cook County Hospital, Chicago's central warehouse for the dispossessed, grimy Doric columns looking like mythic swollen tongues furiously shot from hell. Television used to dramatize its austere façade in *St. Elsewhere*, slicing and serving a powerful chunk of verisimilitude once a week. It made Denzel Washington a star, but now Morgan viewed the stark uncut version daily, continuously, without commercial interruptions—watched until it rubbed out of sight.

Earlier, a dapper senior citizen boarded, taking the seat directly in front of Morgan. He wore lime green slacks with a red shirt under a powder-blue sport coat that glowed like a neon beer sign. Now the "L's" double doors hissed and clanked open, blowing in a thin wispy brother who skittered over and plopped next to powder blue man, shoulder to shoulder. Made a beeline, as if he wanted to ensure getting a seat, but the train was nearly empty. PB man was intently working a crossword puzzle. Oblivious.

This peculiar behavior triggered Morgan's bullshit detector, an instinct-enhancing device, purportedly developed by Hemingway, a boon to writers universally.

The "L" rumbled past the dingy Henry Horner housing project, a stone's throw from the United Center on Madison Street, former home of His Airness, the greatest to ever play the game. The Green Line train didn't run so much as it lurched, pitched and rolled on century-old tracks, lumbering, steel-wheeled, spark-shooting. This slithering mass of iron and glass shuttles continually between the crime-ridden squalor of Englewood and the placid western suburb of Oak Park, Hemingway's home until he turned eighteen and decamped for Europe and WWI.

Morgan recalled his second date with Jan, strolling along Lake Street on a warm evening enjoying Baskin-Robbins ice cream. He'd wanted her to like Oak Park and pointed out the magnificent Frank Lloyd Wright prairie-style homes, hoping the cloak of Wright's grandeur also graced him for having the good taste to make this village his home.

"The worlds most famous swinger was also from Oak Park," he told her, laying the foundation for his thoughts on the subject of poor devils.



“Swinger? Who’s that?”

“Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of Tarzan.” He glanced over and smiled, “Swinging on vines, you know?”

“Oh, right, I get it. Interesting,” she said, forming a delightful groove with her tongue on the white-and-red-swirled ice cream tip. “Not anything kinky.”

“When I was a kid watching Tarzan movies, you could count on it, some black native guy schlepping cargo on top of his head would fall into the water and the crocs would get him. Then some white guy, never Tarzan, would make a tragic face and say, ‘poor devil!’”

“Poor devil?” She laughed nervously, but Morgan remembered it as a joyous song, a carillon chiming somewhere deep in his heart.

“Right, they wouldn’t even try to save him. It was confusing, trying to make a connection with the devil and being black and poor.”

“What conclusions did you draw?” They stood at the intersection near the theater they’d left only minutes before, stopped for the light.

“Oh, well now I know it was just the racist Hollywood propaganda.” Directly, Morgan told himself to put a sock in it before he frightened her and then, wouldn’t he be the poor devil?

Sunlight struggling now through gray-streaked train windows promised continued unfolding of a glorious May day. Metal rubbed metal as the train ground westward, hypnotically. Before long Morgan began nodding, fighting off sleep. Banking into a turn, an empty green 7-Up bottle rattled the length of the coach past Morgan like an errant gutter ball waking him.

He eyed the back of the wispy brother’s motionless head and it called to mind those stolid African carvings peddled at ubiquitous Chicago summer street-fests, vendors with exotic accents haggling and dickering as if the future of Africa was not in turmoil, not ravaged by AIDS, petty tyrants, poverty—too many people who can only dream of acquiring a pair of shoes.

Then: commotion. “Hey what the hell ya doing?” PB man, suddenly agitated, jumped to his feet. His seatmate, looking puzzled, popped up also.

“You crazy mister, I ain’t messin’ wid choo.”

“Son-of-bitch! You were in my pocket.” PB man’s face was flushed tomato red. He grabbed a black forearm and tried to pull it back down in the seat, madder than Saddam Hussein and it was all playing out directly in front of Morgan.

“Naw, you crazy man, I ain’t been in yo pocket. Let me go.” He twisted and broke free easily.

"Call the conductor, call the conductor!" PB man yelled, blinking fitfully.

What conductor? Since the C.T.A. cutback, operating the train and doors is a one-person effort. The operator was up front, five coaches forward. At the next stop the artful dodger scurried away, melting into the thin crowd headed down the steps. Over in three minutes. PB man shot Morgan a glaring eye, as if somehow he was involved. Then, looking back over his shoulder, he moved to a seat across the aisle.



In the hall, fishing for his key, Morgan knew Jan was painting. He smelled it. Inside he found her on a stepstool wearing only an old V-neck T-shirt, painting window trim. Concentrating. She loves to paint—busier than a one-arm paperhanger. He kissed the back of her thigh, right there at eye level, why not?

"Well, how did it go? Did they like you? I know they did." She blew a rebellious hair from her eye.

He opened the fridge and grabbed a strawberry-kiwi Snapple. "Can you believe it, a writer listening to books on tape?"

"I listen to books on tape, honey. *The Deep End of the Ocean*, remember from Oprah?"

"Right, right."

"And the Geisha memoir's tapes that a big brown handsome Santa brought me last Christmas."

"Right, but you're a reader, not a writer. A writer has to *see* words."

"It's O.K. to be just a reader, isn't it honey?" She turned and faced him, paint brush upturned, his T-shirt her toga. No resemblance to Cicero expounding in the Roman Senate, he thought, but a hell of a lot more fetching.

"Sure, sweetheart." His dead-on Bogey imitation earned a soft smile. "I didn't mean it like that." He kissed the other thigh and watched her carefully laying white vertical strokes on the window trim. Then he told her about see-that Artie, the laughing nutcracker, the bean-snapping woman, the nigger and the train pickpocket.

"Remember last night, honey, the armored car holdup?"

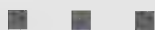
She nodded, eyes leveled on the trim.

"Well. The suspect dropped a book at the crime scene. Fingerprints on the book, that's how they nailed him."

"Fingerprints?"

"You got it. Loops, ridges and whorls did him in."

"Whorls?"



Morgan understood she was only half-listening. When absorbed in a project, Jan plows straight ahead. Gets it *Done*. The little engine that could, I think I can, I think I can.

"Yes. I'm working on something in my head."

"The train's good. Honey, help me put this stuff away, please, so I can sit."

"Well, baby, it's a start, but I need more. So far I've got just a personal anecdote and they're like assholes, you know, everybody's got one."

"Opinions, I always heard it was opinions." She ran hot water in the kitchen sink, thoroughly washing the paint brush.

From behind, Morgan regarded golden tendrils springing incorrigibly from the nape of her slender neck. He grabbed a handful of Wisconsin dried cherries that her mother brought from Door County (because her "sin-in-law" loved them so) and followed Jan into the living room. Gathering the cross-stitching kit from a cloth bag near the end of the sofa, she ducked her head and began working, fingers moving decisively up and under on a Frank Lloyd Wright pattern. Poised above her, he lifted his hand and momentarily considered dropping a cherry down the front of her toga.

"How's this? Suppose I came to his assistance, but unknown to me, he had the wrong impression."

"Impression?"

"Right. Suppose he assumed we were working together?" Her sweet unsuspecting temperament was like water cascading along the secret riverwalk of his heart. It's why he loved her, probably reason number one. But she could be too trusting sometimes, a wee bit naïve.

"Yeah, go on."

"After the wispy brother splits, I pick up on it."

"How do you know he's assuming anything? Does he say anything?"

"That's redundant."

"What is?"

"Anything. You said it twice."

"Oh, honey, for heaven's sake."

"Anyway, in the narrative, I describe body language, shrinking back, facial expression, and before he flies across the aisle in a huff, I have him say something revealing."

"Not the N-word I hope."

"Of course not, give me *some* credit."

"Sorry darling, kiss, kiss."

Moving behind the sofa, Morgan marveled at Jan's quick lithe hands working the colorful pattern, hair fluttering and shimmering like fairytale

flax in the afternoon sunlight. He leaned over the sofa back and kissed her forehead, upside-down lips he couldn't reach. And just then his mind's eye zoomed in on a man sporting a pony tail, same texture, same color—Jan's brother, Brian.

"He'll say, 'Get away from me, you think I'm *stupid*?' That's what he'll say."

"Doesn't convince *me* he's assuming."

"Well, it's the other stuff, too, remember? In the end, the old gent gets smacked between the eyes with some universal truth, but not before I flash-back to Brian—"

"Brian? Not Brian again. What about Brian?" She froze momentarily and let out a sigh of resignation, as if aware that in a few seconds, she would be deeply exasperated with him.

"Well...hypocrisy. Face it, Precious, selling dope in Florida is a lot worse than pickpocketing, morally speaking—"

"Morally speaking. *Whatever* are you talking about?"

"My character—"

"You mean *my* brother."

"—could help PB man or he can look the other way...honor among thieves, you know."

"*Thieves!* Leave Brian out." She frowned at the pattern in her hand and glanced up sharply as if miffed that he was still there.

"Honey, honey."

"My brother's no thief, and *certainly* no hypocrite. Write about your family."

"No, no, that's not what I mean. I like him, you know that, we'll change his name. See, after he drives up here to Chicago, I weave him in with the book-dropping brother, you know how Brian loved books, and—"

"Still does."

"PB man and—"

"Brian's *out*. Write about your ex-wife. You're always saying how goofy she was."

"—police profiling in Florida. Pulling folks over on the interstate for DWB, driving while black. Pulling over a load of coal, they call it."

"What? And where did you get that? Your point is—?"

"Hey, how much for Snapple this time?" Trying to buy time, he figured things could turn sour in a cross-stitching minute.

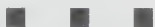
"Three for two dollars, why do they do it like that?" she demanded, as if he were responsible for the hard time mathematically challenged endured for shopping without a calculator.

"Did you know there's only one toilet in London for every 10,000 persons," he said, apropos of nothing. "Read it in *USA Today*. Folks are pissing outdoors on famous monuments ruining them."

"Interesting." But she didn't look up.

"My point is that Brian's skin may be a capital asset." It occurred to Morgan that he should back off and shut up, but he couldn't...in for a penny in for a pound. "For some dope dealers cruising the highways, whiteness translates into affirmative action, job protection."

"Affirmative action! Whiteness! That's great, really great," she said, eyes flashing. "You had to push it, didn't you?" Flinging aside Frank Lloyd Wright's vision, she stormed off to the bedroom.



He's coming fast now, this small-time marihuana dealer, hustling up I-95 from Miami, portentous winds spinning through alloy wheels. A brief stop in Orlando and then on to Chicago. Hair trimmed, the blond pony tail forsaken, he's obviously not a load of coal. Aiming for legitimacy, he has positioned library books on the back seat of the Hertz rental Impala: Poe, Conrad, Crane, Hemingway, Steinbeck. Stashed in the spare tire well is a fresh kilo of Mexican gold. Carefully maintaining the speed limit, the driver rolls the Impala northward toward unyielding destiny, and with each passing mile marker the salmon and teal panache of Miami recedes in the exhaust, brown-gray brushwood and stubby roadside scrub darting past endlessly in the gloaming like a rush of furious greyhounds. Jan's plea lingers in the charged air, a silvery Billie Holiday lament. *Not Brian again*. Off and alone in his head, Morgan's scribbling away, getting it all down black on white. There'll be time later for the wailing and gnashing of teeth.

W. J. Herring

Collision

The end.

There *has* to be a good reason for a person to put a gun in his mouth. George Steiner felt that he had a good reason, and later on, after all was said and done, after the brains and the blood and the urine and the feces were cleaned up, and after the news media captured the story and let it go again, all twisted and crazy-like, many people (worldwide) agreed with him. The words “he got what he deserved” probably hadn’t been yelled, uttered, whispered or thought so many times across the globe in one twenty-four hour span since the day Ted Bundy was killed. But those who knew him, those who really knew him—his family (one wife, one ten-year-old son, one twelve-year-old daughter), his neighbors (he lived in a real neighborhood, where people knew each other), his coworkers (he held a maintenance position at a state run university)—would say that George Steiner was no Ted Bundy.

But even if they had told him so, and no one ever did, the words would slip silently past his ears and slam garbled and meaningless into his brain. For one Sunday, the fifth Sunday after the collision, while the rest of his family was attending mass, George calmly prepared for his own death. He looked into many boxes filled with many pictures of all the people he knew and loved over thirty-six years, and he wrote loving but sad, sad letters to each of his family members (and one to his mother). He ate his last meal, a tiny bowl of Cap’n Crunch, then took a short and rather chilly shower. Feeling refreshed and comfortable with himself for the first time in weeks, he went to the basement, sat on the floor cross-legged, took his glasses off and put a pistol into his mouth. He concentrated deeply and tried unsuccessfully to ignore the itch in his nostril. He set the gun down and blew his nose on a towel from a pile of nearby laundry. Staring at the heap of dirty clothes, he put the silver weapon back into his mouth. He stared...He frowned...He sighed loudly, shaking his head almost violently while he gathered the clothes, put them in the washer along with a bit too much detergent and some stain treatment, then returned to his place on the hard cement. Once again replacing the gun, he counted to three slowly, waited an extra second, then pulled the trigger. He never heard, saw, touched, tasted, or smelled anything ever again. Ever.

*The beginning.*

George Steiner was a good guy, and nobody in his small circle of life would doubt that. They would immediately tell you that he had a great sense of humor (he did many half decent, although occasionally annoying imitations, including George Burns, Mr. Rodgers, Homer Simpson, and the teacher from Charlie Brown), he always tried to do the right thing (volunteering all year long for the Toys for the Children Christmas program), and some would even call him wild (he had been known to jump into neighborhood swimming pools fully clothed). But outside of that circle, George pretty much blended in with everybody else. He was normal all the way around, and that stood fine with him. This average guy will retire by the age of fifty-three. How many people can say that? This thought kept him going when the world jumped on his back, and he took it with him wherever he went, because, sooner or later, at some point each day, the world would have no choice but to jump on his back.

But today was special because he had another great thought to carry around. Today he would ask Erinn to have another child with him. They talked about it before, a last chance to have a third before they became too old. He smiled to himself thinking about a new baby, and he imagined the look on Erinn's face as he asked her. Maybe he'll get down on one knee...

Before he could finish the thought, a car swerved out in front of him, and George's heart jumped. He slammed the brakes to avoid hitting it and was almost smashed by the station wagon behind him. Horns blared. George's face turned white and then red as he watched the car speed away. It was an orange sports car, obviously brand-new and obviously expensive. The license plate read MY BABY. George, hands shaking and sweating, pulled into the next roadside gas station to calm down.

Armed with a soda and a coffee, George got back onto the road. He would be late for work, he smelled of sweat, and he almost died. Perfect. His jaw hurt from clenching teeth. The more the scene replayed in his head, the madder he became, and he caught himself muttering under his breath. "Stupid rich spoiled son of a...damn orange piece of..." He tried to regain the happy thoughts that started off his morning, with some success.

As he neared a convenience store, something orange caught his eye. The same sports car threatened, ready to pull out of the parking lot. George drew closer, and he realized that the car could possibly jump in front of him again! He saw tires spinning and could've sworn he heard a squeal. Slowing down, trying to be a safe driver, George watched the orange car practically fly onto the highway. As it left the lot, he could see the person driving. She spoke

into a cellular phone and appeared not to notice that George was even on the road. Miffed, George tried to follow her, but even in traffic, his ten-year-old family economy van proved no match for the orange speedster.

George Gets Mad

Work that day combined a mixture of dull complacency and venomous anger, and George rewound the scenes from his morning drive. He even took time out of his break to call Erinn at home, who tried to get him to relax.

"What's the big deal? I don't understand why you're so upset. Forget about it."

As usual, she was right, but it didn't matter. Deep down it bothered him, and he knew that he felt annoyed because the person driving the car looked younger than him and seemed to be better off. She would probably be able to retire before she was fifty-three. And to top it off, she didn't even notice that he had slowed down and potentially saved her life. No thanks. No oops wave in the rear view mirror. Nothing.

George's friends, sensing his unease, took shots and jabs at him every chance they could. It's what friends do.

"What's the matter, can't keep up with the girls?"

"When you gonna get a new car?"

"What really happened, you sleep in?"

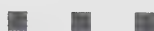
But his third floor assistant, Bongo, really fueled his imagination.

"I would've let her hit me." He leaned on his broom and squinted one eye like a creepy pirate. "Might get a new car out of it." George pictured himself in his own orange sports car, and the vision he saw brought a goofy smile to his face. He wore that smile for about two hours.

In the end, he decided to take his wife's advice and forget about it. He was becoming obsessive, and that bothered him. As the work day ended, he drove away wondering why he had felt so crazy.

Woman in Charge

She was the only prominent African-American financial advisor in the Tri-City area, and one of only six who were women. She represented five clients, on call twenty-four hours a day. She was twenty-nine years old and she was rich. She was filthy rich and all of her clients had become rich because of her, and all of them combined were worth more than 25 million dollars. Olivia Hamlin had many possessions that she loved: cell phones, computers, diamonds, flat screen televisions (yes, plural), digital everything, three cars, including one \$58,000 orange sports car.



Oh, yeah, she also had a daughter.

Five-year-old Kayla was her ground, the one who reminded her every day that the simple things in life were the best. A pencil and paper can provide hours of entertainment. A cardboard box can explode the imagination. And the sight of a flying bird can provoke wonder. Kayla had the ability to slow down the speedy life of one of the city's most influential women.

After running errands in the morning, Olivia promised the whole afternoon to Kayla. So she sent the day nanny home and told Kayla to get her roller skates. They were going to the park! Hooray!

The Worst Day Ever

The playground looked perfect, the weather felt wonderful, and Kayla wore the face of the happiest girl in the world. A natural skater, she graduated from plastic toy skates to the real ones in only two weeks. Now she wanted rollerblades, but Olivia put the brakes on that idea.

"Not until you can skate backwards and stop safely." She figured this agreement would last awhile because Kayla couldn't stop to save her own life. But she loved to practice and Olivia knew that as soon as she accomplished those moves, she would be asking for the blades. She called her daughter over to her.

"Kayla, I want you to listen to me." She crouched on one knee so that she did not speak down to the child (learned that one at rich mommy school). "I am going to sit on this bench and make a phone call. I do not want you to go past that weeping willow tree." She pointed to the tree and waited for Kayla to acknowledge it. "That is plenty of room for you to practice your skating."

"Yes, Mommy." Kayla smiled because the willow tree was farther than she was ever allowed to go, practically thirty yards of free skating pavement.

Olivia thumbed through her mail while she waited on hold with the bank. Almost every five seconds (she didn't count, she possessed the internal Mother's Clock) she would look up at her daughter, who really took advantage of the extra yardage given. She almost made it to the willow. Olivia looked back down at her phone bill (five seconds pass), she looked up and Kayla nearly lost her balance. She looked down again (five seconds passed). She looked up and Kayla skated backwards in front of the sad tree. She looked back down (five seconds pass). She looked up and did not immediately see her daughter, and out of habit, almost went back to her mail. But a small invisible alarm went off and she scanned the area quickly. She spotted Kayla about fifteen yards past the tree by the side of the road talking to a man in a blue car. The security system in her brain bypassed the big alarm and went straight to the giant ones, the ones that make your heart pound and your hair stand up.

"What is she doing?" She spoke to herself as she got up and made her way towards Kayla. She wanted to run but she only walked fast, and her mind relaxed a little bit when the man in the blue car smiled at her and waved. But as he waved with his right hand, he reached out and grabbed the girl with his left and pulled her right through the open window. Olivia saw Kayla's head bump on the top of the door, and she immediately broke into a run.

"What are you doing? No! *What are you doing?*"

She didn't get this far in her life by not being a quick thinker. Before the car left her sight, she was no longer chasing it, but running to her own car. She still had her phone, and with her speedy orange sports car, she could easily follow that car and talk to 911. The perfect plan. But before she called 911, she wanted to concentrate on catching up to the person who just took her daughter. The end of the park road led to the highway, and she prayed that she wouldn't get caught in traffic.

Worlds Collide

The drive home for George Steiner was a comfortable one. The traffic moved relatively fast for a Friday, with the summer scenery just reaching its peak. In a few weeks, a heat wave would reign, and George's world would turn dry and brown. But he couldn't worry about the weather. He only thought of the child that he would possibly conceive tonight and the wonderful responsibility of having a brand-new baby. He actually felt butterflies in his stomach.

Those butterflies turned ulcer-like when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a streak of orange tearing towards the highway. His brain, white with sudden anger, did a quick estimated calculation of his speed and position in relation to the position and speed of the orange car. He figured that the orange car would make it to the highway just before he could pass the turnoff to the park, resulting in that woman getting a chance to pull out in front of him for the third time in one day. So he went faster.

"You're not going to get me again lady," he said loudly to no one.

He was close enough to see the driver of the orange car. She eyed him up and hit the gas. George could tell that she wanted to go for it. He turned crazy with anger and put his own pedal to the floor. Thoughts of his children and his wife and his potential new child flashed in his head, and he had a brief moment of clarity and truth. His insides screamed, *What the hell are you doing?* and he tried to slow down, but it was too late.

Manufactured thunder rocked his ears as he slammed into the orange car. His head smashed into the windshield just hard enough to turn him into a madman. The two cars were steaming and locked at the fenders.



George jumped out of his van and ran to the orange car like a lunatic. The driver was trying to push her door open. She looked like more of a lunatic than George did.

George immediately shot her the double bird, knowing full well how immature that must have looked. He ripped her door open, and it almost fell right off of the hinges. He started screaming.

"How's your baby now! Huh! How's your baby now!" She held a cell phone, broken into three pieces, trying to push buttons as George continued his verbal tirade. His face looked almost as red as the blood trickling down his forehead.

"You're not going to be such a big shot without your baby to parade around now! You won't be so important when you can't show off your baby."

She threw the shattered phone at him and jumped out of her car.

"Where is she, you sicko AHHHHHH!" She punched him square in the nose and drew blood. George fell back and watched as she collapsed and vomited. She was shaking and convulsing. George started to panic. Cars were pulling over and he heard sirens in the distance.

"Hey, lady, you okay?" George knelt over top of her and tried to comfort her. His whole body felt like one large lump of guilt. She turned her head to him with a dreamy gaze.

"Where's my baby?" she spoke softly.

George looked up at her car and tried to force a smile.

"She's right here. Don't worry. She's a little banged up, but she'll be fine."

She closed her eyes. Before she passed out she said calmly, "Thank you, thank you so much."

Lives Destroyed

The girl, Kayla, was never seen again. Olivia wasted weeks in the hospital recovering from internal injuries and depression. She would recover though, and she gave the rest of her miserable life to searching for her daughter. She died of heartbreak before the age of 53.

After George spent three days convincing police that he was not a kidnapper, he received fines of almost one thousand dollars for reckless driving. Newspaper and television journalists around the world almost immediately dubbed him "The Road-Rage Racist," and in the weeks leading up to his death, informal news polls across the country gave him the title "The Most Hated Man in America."

There *has* to be a good reason for a person to put a gun in his mouth.

Michael Hoerman

The State of American Poetry

Making it as a poet
Is like making it as a politician.
Only there is one party,
One drop-to-your-knees-and-suck-it-if-you-want-to-get-
anywhere-in-this-town
Ivory Tower.
Even the outcast poets cave in to the universities.
No one bothers to ask how the rich tapestry of poetry
Can be made from one thin thread.
No one says What are the odds that poets—
Poets, of all people—are so alike
They will all seek MFAs and professorships?
[at least the good ones, the ones worth reading,
the unspoken mantra goes]
And the books they publish, the tone,
The unending, numbing, page-after-page sameness;
A stultifying ritual intransigence—
Rarefied, ethereal, omniscient and
Bland.
But then, when you've written about
Your
troubled marriage
Your
affairs with students
That
incident with the department head
The
castigating fear of denial of tenure
And, most important of all, about
The things you read or read,
What else is left to say?
So the drones throw a party.
They invite the alumni



from the fill-in-the-blank Writers Workshop
And/Or the other professors
From the University of fill-in-the-blank Creative Writing Program,
And they bolt the doors.
And they dim the lights.
And they call it Poetry.

Someday they'll get what they deserve;
Down at the moth-eaten bottom of the remainder bins,
They will make a splendid salon.

Mark J. Hoy

Last Rites

Life, or the lack thereof,
pushes me towards this melancholy state,
where the forcefulness forms a front
and the tumultuous rumblings within
wage a bloody war against my soul.
Where the last bastion of defense
is a ray of light that is cast out
from the blue, murky water
that entrances me—hypnotizing.
It forever sets my eyes gazing off
into the distance where I try
to form a focus on the periphery vision
of the horned demons, gray and black—
that have transfixed my every movement
with their steely eyes
and furrowed brows.
I become deaf. I become dumb.
Paralyzed within the cold water
forcing me under
as my walls collapse and the will of life tumbles apart.
Brick by brick,
stone by stone,
day by day,
breath after breath.

Li Min Hua

Closet Mantra

If I
If I could
just get
just
just
get all
all those balls
balls and arms
arms and legs
legs and crotch perfumes
right here
here inside with me
I might never
I might never have to tell
never tell anyone
anyone at all
I'm queer!
queer! queer! queer!

Ashaki Jackson

Coltrane Jesus

A love supreme

A love supreme

(I warp words like a Christian in love with the Supreme)

I lick Lot's salted wounds for my life's flavor—

Suck my fingers seasonless, flat

Unleavened

And place them in Bibles to hold testaments open

hold heaven open and wait for a flood

Breath salty-strong like young crusaders,

I lead Psalmatic Blues tributes

on stages between Heaven and Cotton Club churches

I am revered taste

sound

stringed instruments of lyrics

Saints

bend over me,

lean collarbone into me

(bass-woman with strings tucked between her breast)

We make hymnals to the god

in between our breast.

It

beats like Santeria on the door of Catholics

beats like Coltrane at the feet of Naima

beats like Christianity before Jesus

(Together, we sing from the abdomen.)

I word-salt my wounds as an offering—

wash feet with saliva from built-up incantations,

prayers,



and take them to stage-altars to cure bloated followers like dried meat.

Saints

pluck over me like apostolic shuffles.

I string rejoices in the word,

read sheet music and Bible pages,

fold them neatly and tuck them in my womb to make the sound more motherly.

Together, we sing from the abdomen.

Bud Jennings

In and Out of Paris

Owen is an American who has lived in Paris for several years. While he had gone there to find inspiration to restart his painting, he has only found a job teaching English and a nightlife that keeps the supply of men abundant. His friend Laurent gives him a birthday present, an appointment with a fortune teller, who tells Owen he must “learn to travel in a different way.” This manifests itself in Owen being able to travel into photographs. Owen first travels the world through photographs he finds in magazines. Then he travels back in time, to the Studio 54 of the 1970s, to the day of his parents’ wedding, to the German occupation of Paris, where Owen finds a man unlike any of his promiscuous and epicurean contemporaries.

In the following excerpt, Owen and Laurent meet at a gay bar the night of Owen’s return from a summer vacation in the States.

At a quarter to ten that night, the humid air was an accomplice to Owen’s delusion that the summer wasn’t half over. The streets were filled and loud in the Marais, the neighborhood which had seen German Nazis uproot its Jewish population, some of whom had come back, and which more recently had made room for swanky gay men in boots with pointed toes. Storefronts were testaments of cohabitation: Goldberg’s restaurant—as famous for its food as its being bombed by terrorists in the eighties—and kosher delis shared sidewalks with queer bars like Le Subway and Le Quetzal.

He turned onto rue Michel-le-Comte, the dark sidestreet whose offices were closed at night. With no competition from even a single street lamp, the blue neon sign in Le Duplexe window cast a light that turned the narrow street into a glowing aquarium. A handful of patrons weary of the smoke and crowd had taken comfort in the evening air outside.

“French men, how I love you,” Owen whispered to himself, a smile pulling his face back in an almost painful contortion. The smile came from knowing he was back among *les pédés*, fags, more than at the slim possibility of finding warmth in the arms of any of the Duplexe regulars, who were seriously *les pédés intellos* who talked about politics and Sartre more than

about getting laid. There was no sex after Le Duplexe, which he'd sometimes called Le Sans-sexe, but he didn't usually mind the place as a venue for some drinks and laughs with Laurent.

A few drinks with conversation and seeking a bedmate were contradictory activities. Cruising was a solitary pursuit. Owen thought there was nothing uglier than a pack of libido-starved expedition queers, drooling, drunk and horny, tripping over one another to get a better look at the prey. He'd seen enough nature documentaries to know that when groups went on a hunt *en masse*, what almost always followed was bickering—which could lead to the loss of blood. That went for wolves and lions. In the case of men, the life fluid which could be drained was ego. Alone was better.

On the walls of Le Duplexe was a new round of paintings by one of the Marais talent. He looked up at one, a dayglow abstract of a nude boy, and sighed at the hackneyed dick jetting out the forehead. He couldn't see Laurent among the crammed bodies and constellation of burning cigarettes, so Owen made his way toward the bar at the end of the long room.

As he pushed his way through, he was again familiarizing himself with those Paris faces. The black hair, the noses (a thinner, subcompact version of the fuller Roman sedan), eyebrows round as rainbows. When he'd first moved to France, he didn't like their looks: the gaunt faces, the flat chests, the arms more slender than a ballerina's. And they were always dressed too impeccably. Runway famine....And now, on his first night back in Paris, they seemed a bit like that (normal after a month of viewing the living steroid receptacles that swaggered around America), but he still was taken by their beauty.

He knew Laurent was probably at the bar, and wedged his way in that direction. A man caught his attention. The face was all blessed bone structure, but held an expression that was neither bored nor contemptuous. He lifted his drink to his carved lips. Even in the low light, Owen could see, on the back of the hand, the veins loosely entangled; smaller ones protruded at the joints of the fingers and cast delicate shadows. Nails were buffed and cut precisely. Little translucent seashells. How those French boys were manicured. Owen's own hands were all jagged nails, torn cuticles, and the occasional scab from some forgotten accident. Once a Frenchman had taken Owen's hand, inspected it with dismay, and said, "But these are the hands of a tradesman."

All around were French heads. Red hair and freckles from Brittany. Mediterranean, dark, brown eyes. Northern blonds. Conversations eddied around him. "...je'n suis pas d'accord..." "...il m'a dit qu'il est con..." French, that summer-lost language had returned like the flutter of autumn-returning wings. (He had to be romantic about it; he was, after all, small-town in

many ways.) A few faces were laughing, but their laughing was reserved, not at all like the robust, open-mouthed, head-tossing laughter he'd seen in bars in Boston and New York over the summer.

He passed the man with the impeccable hands, and found Laurent, leaning against the bar, watching his approach. The standard smile Laurent used for greeting—something on the verge of a condescending smirk—was tonight embellished with one raised eyebrow (surely an indication of the importance of the reunion after the summer). Laurent was only thirty-five, but seemed so much more composed and relaxed than Owen's thirty that Owen had wondered how Laurent (or any of his Cary Grant ilk) had ever been children. There were guys in bars anyone would call *boys*, but not Laurent—handsome, a shirt bought in the Sixteenth, hair that waved and seemed to say, "*très suave*." Laurent was sophisticated and smart and had become a sort of vocal, caustic super-ego in Owen's Paris.

When Owen was close enough, Laurent extended his hand to hoist Owen by the neck to him. One, two, three, four kisses on his cheeks. "Ah, *mon amerloque vulgaire*. *C'est bon de te voir*." *Amerloque*, the harshest of the epithets for an American and Laurent's pet name for Owen. He looked Owen up and down. "My God, what are you wearing?"

His voice sounded better than any on the language tapes Owen had heard in high school. Owen did respond to the insult. It was part of the game.

"Sneakers and jeans," Laurent said. "One month in that country, and you're already back in the uniform."

"We should have never wasted our money on D-Day."

"First, your French has gotten worse after your time away; and, please, don't bring up the War. It's too serious for you, for anyone from a nation filled with people who wear—what did I always see when I was there?—'I'm on stupid' t-shirts."

"It's 'I'm *with* stupid,' and I should be wearing one now."

Laurent, annoyed at having made the grammatical error, pushed away, and took a better look at Owen in the process. "You have a tan, nice. A little extra weight, but I see you've kept it in the right places," he said, squeezing Owen's chest.

Laurent held his glass of beer precariously—its fat little stem clasped between two fingers like a cigar. The other hand, warm and humid, was placed on Owen's shoulder as a laugh, wide and showing the fan of perfect teeth, burst out as quickly as a hiccup, and finished as fast.

He stared at Owen in a way intended, so Owen thought, to demonstrate the power he held for the moment. He had something to say, but

was not quite ready to divulge it. There was little real power left in Laurent. His parents, physicians, had amassed some money, died in a lava slide in Montserrat one August day while Laurent was in the middle of advanced university studies in ornithology. He was left a splendid apartment in the sixteenth arrondissement, cash, but—with no parents checking grade reports—little motivation to continue school. He had grown up going to good schools, speaking with an accent that indicated his exclusive postal code; which was enough in Paris to get a job writing pamphlets for a snobby organization concerned with the preservation of France's winged and furry friends. Owen had always assumed he was bored.

Finally, Laurent smiled, devilishly, said, "*Tu veux quoi?*"

"*Biere, comme toi.*"

And he was away, his back joining the others lined up at the bar. Owen looked around, the regulars were all there. The skinny students in the Sorbonne attire: black biker jackets and jeans. The older boys in suits and crisp, white shirts, scarves wrapped and looped around their necks to form little Hermès bouquets hiding generous chins. The glasses: heavy, acrylic frames and thin wire ones; the lenses in every conceivable shape in geometry. Conversations everywhere, their lips remaining in tight kisses as they talked. Little to be cruised here, he thought, looking around, standing alone in a web of conversation.

But he was there to see Laurent. "*J'ai arrangé un cadeau pour toi,*" Laurent had said on the phone. "...arranged a gift for you." What did "arranged" mean? A French idiom he'd never heard before?

Upon returning, Laurent lifted his fresh beer to Owen's recent change in age. "*Bon anniversaire. Thirty, thirty, thirty. Thirty is important. For men of our ilk, very important. For everyone, actually. The twenty-ninth year. A crucial age. Le retour de la planete Saturne.*" Owen had seen the Tarot side of Laurent's French thinking come out before, and he braced himself for a little tutorial in the paranormal.

The planets, Laurent explained, speed along their orbits in a grand choreography, and Saturn took twenty-nine years to complete its circle around the sun. And what did it mean? Everything, dear Owen, who had been heretofore ignorant of the powerful influence of the planet that caused, in each of us, a sort of rebirth every twenty-nine years. "As a homosexual, you have no doubt been thinking you're advancing toward petrification. Poor Owen."

"I wasn't exactly thinking I'd be spitting out teeth any time soon."

"No, but your gums are already receding."

"*Merci.*"

"Enough. The point is, you need to embrace your rebirth, but you first need to understand a bit what that means."

Owen looked at Laurent, was sure he had a stupid look on his face. "How much of what you're saying is supposed to make sense to me?"

"What you need to comprehend is that Saturn has already started a second cycle around Helios since you first came to stain the world." And then, again, a smile.

As his friend continued his explanation of the stellar arrangements, Owen looked at the large poster behind the bar. New since the last time he'd been there. On it were three men, all nude to the waist. Their beaming smiles seemed at odds in the land of two public expressions: blasé for day and blasé for night. Over their heads was the suggestion: "*Luttez contre le SIDA. Oubliez vos chemises, mais n'oubliez pas vos preservatifs.*" Fight AIDS. Forget your shirts, but don't forget your condoms....Even AIDS, thought Owen, when veiled behind a French acronym, seemed so distant—not anything that carried off a few New York friends, not a monster that was hiding under everyone's bed.

Preservatifs. A memory came to Owen, his first month in France. He was at a bar, when a man asked, "Do you prefer French wine to American wine?" (They always needed to know stuff like that.) "Yes, American wine gives me a headache." And he had explained why, in his flawed French, that American wine was filled with *preservatifs*, sulfates specifically. Looking at the poster, he almost smirked at his torturing the language. *L'étranger.*

From the white silk pocket of his shirt, Laurent pulled a small envelope, in which was a *carte de visite*. Heavy paper, raised letters, better quality than those dispensed from the machines in the Métro stations. It read:

Madame Silvie de la TOUR-St. MICHEL
5, rue Paganini
75020 Paris
42.73.03.23

"Turn it to the other side," Laurent said.

On the back, *1er septembre, 12h.*

"*Je ne comprends toujours pas,*" Owen said, his eyes still on the card.

"As always. That's why I'm going to explain everything." But Laurent, who loved manufacturing mysteries, would get to the explanation in due time, only after interest simmered a while. "She is your gift—rather, an appointment with her on this date, at noon precisely. No being late. Quite

a nice woman. She's a friend of Fabrice's, and came with him to Nathalie's party. Too bad you missed it. I'm sure it couldn't compare to the wonders of your superpower, but, still, it was quite amusing." Handing over the tiny envelope for Owen to tuck the card away. "*Voilà. Avec affection, mon cher,*" he said, smiling, as proud as a father presenting a son his first car, with a so-what-do-you-think? raised eyebrow to suggest the thus-far unspoken dimensions of the card.

"Does the abuse of America ever get tedious to you people?" Owen wanted to accelerate the process. "How long is this going to take?"

This was met with silence. Owen gave in, slipped on a confused expression, as exaggerated as a vaudevillian's, and said, in languid English, "I do not understand."

"Consistency is your strength, no matter how tedious for those around you.—Idiot! This woman is from one of the oldest, most noble families in France. Fabrice told me."

"*Oui, bien sûr.* I figured that from the 'de la et cetera hyphen et cetera.' Let me see if I can guess. You've set me up with some noble, post-menopausal lesbian who needs a safe front to protect the *de la*, and you got me an interview, and this is going to lift me out of poverty and place my nude ass on the beach off some small island of the coast of Cannes.—But wait a minute! Am I supposed to know how to drive a power boat?—You know, I would be perfect because my accent is heavier than my lisp. I can see it: into the bars we would go, incognito, every night, tanned and drunk. Don't worry, I would never make you use the formal *vous* with me."

Laurent put on the ubiquitous face of French disdain. "There is a verb to use, *vousvoyer*, so you can avoid that awkward syntax. I think you need to hear the entire story. We'll test your attention span."

"In a bar?—even this one? Shit. *D'accord. Vas-y.*"

He wrapped his arm around Owen's shoulder. "The story is actually worth your time. She still may have the 'de la' and the hyphen, but that's about all. No money, no chateau, but she is the direct descendent of a terribly long line of women who have passed down, to each daughter, a gift. That is the only legacy she possesses." Laurent was charmed, smiling, perhaps at the memory of partying with a noblewoman. "You must hear her story."

"Must," Owen said in a weak voice.

"In the late fifteenth century—"

"We're going that far back?" asked Owen, fishing in the pocket of his jeans for his cigarette pack.

Laurent, undaunted, continued, “—there was la duchesse de la Tour-St.Michel, and when she was still not too old, her husband died from something, they think from eating diseased meat.”

“The French can’t blame that on British mad cow disease.”

Laurent looked at Owen with pity. “Yes. Well, after he died the widow was left alone with her children, a daughter and a son—”

“Who no doubt became vegetarians, after what happened to their father.”

“Shut up. As the story goes, one day the duchess heard that her son, who had taken over the affairs of his father, was about to evict a tenant for being far behind in her rent. The tenant, herself a widow, was nearly destitute after her own husband left her alone.”

“More bad meat?”

The question was ignored. “The duchess demanded her son allow the woman to stay in her hovel. Do you know what she said to him?” At this point, Laurent’s voice went into an erudite falsetto. “‘You shall never,’ she said, ‘evict that poor woman. I may have much, and she nothing, but we are the same: women who have lost our husbands. No!’ she said,” (his index finger was raised for emphasis, which knocked the long ash of his Gauloises off-balance), “‘That woman will always have shelter from the harsh winds.’”

Laurent looked at Owen, seemed to be expecting a reaction. Just behind the storyteller were several men who were quiet, perhaps eavesdropping. One caught Owen’s eye, smiled. Cute. Another student.

“Is that it?”

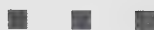
“Hardly.”

“*Laurent, est-ce que tu connais l’expression ‘cut to the chase’?*”

Laurent knew he wasn’t being taken seriously, smiled, but was annoyed. “I’ll tell you this,” he said sharply, “when I am taken in chez la police, for questioning after the body of the expatriate pédé is found ground into a pâté—which, by the way, will be the closest you’ll ever come to being French—I shall confess, and offer them that unflattering photograph I have of you in that spandex dress, drunk as an enlisted man, at Luc’s Christmas party. They’ll need it for the press. In death, you will be remembered as a cheap transvestite in a seedy outfit and smudged make-up.”

“*D’accord, d’accord. Excuses-moi. Continues, mon trésor.*”

“The tenant woman went to the local priest, asked him to go the duchess, to ask for a meeting. The two women met. The poorer of the two ended up having the more valuable possession, which she gave to the other out of gratitude. She carried a cheese, a camembert wheel and a book, *Le Livre du*



Fromage. The duchess was instructed to shave off the top layer of the cheese so the old widow could read the trapped bubbles within. The arrangement of the bubbles was a code, and indicated the inner desires and needs of the duchess. And when the cheese was sliced open, releasing the air of the bubbles inside, those hopes could be realized. The duchess needed a husband."

Owen knew the story could either be one of Laurent's tales of "fantastic reality," as he liked to call them, or, perhaps, was an elaborate way of pulling his leg, a protracted ploy to demonstrate American gullibility.

"So the widow read cheese?" Owen said, laughing.

"She could read cheese, yes, she could read cheese," said Laurent, "the same way your bog-digging, Irish ancestors could read tea leaves or the hoof prints in pig shit or whatever they did to tell their bleak fortunes. Now, when the duchess was remarried, the widow sent a wedding gift. You have no idea what that gift was, do you?"

"I have no idea what that gift was."

"She sent her *Le Livre du Fromage*."

"I can tell by your expression that that's the conclusion, but what does it mean?"

"You are deficient. The book was her way of giving the knowledge of how to read the secrets locked inside the cheese. The duchess acquired the gift, which has been passed down to each daughter, as I told you."

"What if there is no daughter?"

"So far, they've been lucky. And you are lucky—for having an appointment with her. You need it."

"Three years in France and I still have more to learn from cheese?"

"Oh, you have a lot to learn—about life. You're like all Americans. You don't know how to spend your lives. You don't live, you loiter."

The bar was thinning out. A few blocks away the cruise bars would be filling up. Later, when they closed, the discos would open their doors. Owen knew the Stations of the Cross in queer Paris. He looked around, asked Laurent if he wanted a drink.

"Just one more here, I know you're anxious to leave and find a nice Frenchman for the evening."

"I love your people."

"You love a penis, and don't care what nationality it's attached to."

"Je suis toujours démocratique."

"You? You'd look for a glory hole in a voting booth." A long self-satisfied drag on his cigarette. "So, when do you start back to work, Owen?"

"Shit. Too soon."

"You can't complain, you teachers. You know, I would love to see you in a classroom. I can't imagine it. Think you'll have many little fags this year?"

"I really hope not. I hate running into kids at a club or in the Marais. Like those two brats that saw me kissing some guy at Le Cirque. It's the one time I'd like to see some American-style Puritanism here. Keep the children out of discos until they're twenty-one."

"You're selfish. What about the rest of us?"

"What do you care? You're not interested in the young ones. The only thirty-five year-old I know who's still hoping for a sugar daddy."

Their last drinks together were downed quickly. Owen was anxious to see the sights in Le Quetzal or Le Bar. He asked Laurent to accompany him, as he always did, but his friend said he'd stay. Le Duplexe was a place that welcomed a quiet reader in one of its quaint little corners, once the evening was waning and some of the clients were heading out to other places. There was a paperback in Laurent's jacket pocket. He would sit and wait, patient as a spider.

At midnight, Owen was on the streets of the Marais, on his way to places with loud bartenders and men in tank tops who were anxious to do more than trash Sartre and Kant. Owen's hunt in Paris was on.



Anthony Kellman

A Final Battle

Myself, Bussa, witnessed
Breeding of the slaves.
Younger men were preferred. Each day,

thank I god for keeping
shame from me own eye.
Yet, it hurt me to hear the cries,

creolized and grating,
threshing as my own
Africans', those dying kind.

And fruitful girls, given
better nutrition
(even money), enjoyed work loads

light as thistle's touch to
stir up that evil
method used for labor supply.

Myself, Bussa, witnessed
death's demonic sway,
saw it daily each sun-scorched day.

And she who taught me right
to read and write,
met me still at she wooden hut.

Our love had grown real strong,
deep as when the yams
spreading steady inside green fields

fill a man with joy and
hope, and in his dreams,
cresting greatly, he holds his bride.

Fate would have us fighting.
Romance had to wait.
L'Overture was our battle guide.

Haiti stirred up faith in
self. And so we ached,
thirsted, clamored, for freedom's day.

When we heard the Trade had
died, we danced and sang;
blackest rivers ran through our skins.

Nanny said: "We only
goal is tuh be free.
Freedom's purchased with pain and sweat.

Sweat of mother, fathers,
children: all our sweat
running steady like swelling floods."

On me each eye was pinned.
My age was one
reason. Others included war

craft, plantation rank, both
useful, strategic,
spare and free for we seething cause.

Other estate slaves were
watching for the glow
over Bayley's, the cane trash brow

of war. To each in turn,
something came alive.
Orange signals. A heft of dreams.

Freedom's dream. The children,
hopeless all their days,
normal living their greatest need.

Heaven's darkness cloaked our
skins in even tones,
pulsing, taut as love-vines on walls.

Massa, mistress, children
dinnered to a drowse,
deeply sleeping, wouldn't be roused.

Age of cracking dawn
seasoned with patience,
fully peppered with resentment.



Nanny stayed home under
guise of a sore throat,
head leaf-wrapped just to play the part.

Under night-borne cover,
crouched in the all-thick
silence, torches in hand, we lit

the future of our isle
and thought awhile:
burn them houses on Monday. Make

them shout for water's cream.
On Tuesday, cane
burning, make them all shout again,

"Water!" Murder whitemen
Wednesday, make them shout,
"Blood!" make Massa place run with blood.

Our snake-soft hiss would sound
as normal sound.
Horses penned wouldn't even bray.

Our unity was tight
as braided hair.
Rebel units were fastened tight

on main estates across
the isle, each clasped
tightly, led by its own headman.

Jackey, leading driver
over at Simmon's
estate, kept the units as one.

With help from ranger John,
Jackey, one by one,
met each unit and took them words

of hope. With hands held firm
each one prayed in turn
asking God to assist our quest.

They spread the rice and pork
the women cooked
early morning. All ate and sang,

resigned to fate, and, strong
in spirit, longed
brightly boldly for Monday morn.

I was informed each stage
along the way.
Myself, Bussa, the rebel head.

We razed each boiler house
for pitch-fork, ax,
gathered guava sticks tipped with oil.

Surrounded by frogs and
crickets, with our hands
clenched in anger, we struck as planned

with knives, machetes, and fire.
One fourth of fields
burning brightly, a visual fragrance.

Kettle drum sounds rose with
breaking light of dawn
over dewy sour grass. The form

Of war. Red uniforms.
A sounding horn.
Ranked militiaman falling. Ten

more pales soon struck the ground.
I knew they'd send
signals quickly to all their troops.

Tuesday, remnant slaves all
gathered at Bayley's,
fully clothed with the blade's relief.

We fought them there and fought
at Golden Grove,
dripping centuries' sweat, our grief.

Bayley's reeked with powdered
stenches and the blood,
mostly black, was a rapid flood.

Firearms cracked the air and
swords were like one hiss
mingling steel with the flesh of slaves.



Drawn machetes and knives were
slicing at the chains,
Europe's "gift" to a free-born race.

Massa joined the war. The
Mistress on the porch
weeping, clutching a piece of shirt.

Massa loomed with horse and
gun. And then my force
reached up, tugging him from the horse.

We struck the ground as one
unit of blood,
sweat, and spit in the surging dust.

My fists soon rose and fell,
pounding, a great tidal
thing. Massa and I were one at last,

our flows all mixed with earth's
common dust. He was
under. Anger was flooding me.

My blood-smeared blade soon reared
to stab his heart.
Fear like spiders covered his face.

His bulged eyes were veined with hate.
Life, a closing gate.
Cries of crows arced overhead.

He hoped that God would chop
him down. A shot
rang out; blood in my head then spread

until the world went dark.
My death came fast,
heading troops in St. Phillip's heat.

Great ancestors saw my
spirit's restlessness
(saw my captors' own sunless hearts.

How they'd raped me). Those souls
lifted me up from
stone to bear my own spirit home.

Stefan Kiesbye

Sierra Blanca

As soon as they settled into a booth, flies started to bother them. Flies had followed them all the way through Arizona and New Mexico. Had there been flies in California? They couldn't remember any.

Smoke seemed to fill the room, although the man sitting at the counter wasn't smoking. He and the waitress were the only other people in the restaurant. It was a quarter past seven.

From their window they had a view onto their car, a Corolla, the responsible choice, his choice. They had mounted a roof rack, and two oversized bags, the five boxes in the trunk and three more in the backseat contained everything they owned.

"So," she started swatting at the flies without aiming. He knew she was afraid of hitting one.

"How about them Bills?" he asked.

"What about them?"

"They have a new quarterback."

"Oh God." She took her hands off the table and slid back in her seat. The yellow vinyl upholstery seemed to have survived decades of spare visitors. "If we go back to El Paso—it's only one and a half hours away."

"We just got here."

"I could call."

"No you can't." There had been a message on his cell phone, but when he tried to retrieve it, the connection failed. Maybe this was the call to invite him for a meeting. Surely an interview with a gallery owner, now that they had left Los Angeles. Or at least another job teaching art to eighth-graders at some private school. He's tried the phone once more outside their motel room, but his call failed again. "There's no service here."

"There's a phone in our room."

"Right," he said. "Of course."

"It's only a hundred miles. We'll be there in no time."

Outside, the sun had disappeared beyond the mountains, yet the sky was still bright, yellow and orange to the west, and thin blue above the car. Thin blue above the electric blue car.

"You can switch on the fan if you'd like to. Might cool you off a bit."

Erich turned around to the bar where the slouched man was pointing a finger at the ceiling. "Thanks," he said without moving. After a moment



of silence he got up. "Might keep the flies away." He pulled the greasy string two times, then one more.

"Now you switched it off," Elena said.

"No I didn't."

"It's stopping."

He pulled the string again and sat down, "It's going fast now."

The old man gave a few coins to the waitress and Erich watched her in front of the jukebox. Moments later, a Country voice told the story of Johnny, whose father had taken him fishing when he was eight years old. The song played so loudly that Erich shut his ears to the lyrics. After ten hours in the car, he didn't want to know what had happened to Johnny on his fishing trip.

"Is that your Toyota?" The man stood at their table, nodding toward the outside. He was tall, with tan, leathery skin, handsome in an old-fashioned, 50s movie star kind of way. His hair showed only a few strands of gray and was carefully cut.

Elena said yes, yes, that was their car. Her voice, when she talked to strangers, never rose above a whisper. When asked, she often fell silent, then spoke as if her answer were an afterthought, or as if she expected someone else to fill in for her.

"I had one thirty years ago. That's when the station here closed and I went to El Paso. Every day for twenty years."

"Wow," Erich said. He was embarrassed by casual conversations, by the chitchat of people he met in parking lots of Howard Johnsons and Hampton Inns. He felt embarrassed mostly for himself, who didn't know how to keep a conversation going. He had the stoicism of a mule, and warnings about approaching rain or dust storms didn't evoke anything but a shrug from Erich. "Wow," he said again when the man kept silent, his eyes gazing somewhere between Erich and his wife, their table and the car.

Albert's Place was one of only two restaurants in Sierra Blanca. The other one, the Coyote Stop, had not found Elena's approval. "It's dark, nobody's there, and they're vacuuming."

The motel keeper, a lanky, stooped woman with a large head, had advised them to hurry. "Around here, you never know how long they'll be open."

"It's only six," Elena had said.

"Oh no. It's seven. You must be going east."

"But we just lost an hour in El Paso."

"No. It's seven." She owned the Sierra Lounge, an old stone structure reminiscent of a fort. Erich and Elena had chosen it over the Motel Blanca for its Old West looks. Across the street stood the remains of the town's movie theater, the "State" neon sign dark, but seemingly intact.

"I worked here, and I had just built this place when they closed the station," the old man continued. His brown eyes were a bit watery, maybe because of age. They had been like that from the first words he spoke.

"What station was that?" Erich asked.

"The railroad station," Elena said.

"I built this place," the man continued, "and my wife was going to run it."

"You built this place yourself?"

"Yes. And then I drove to El Paso, back and forth every day. My wife ran this place, and I went back and forth for twenty years." His hand described the back and forth—a weak move of the wrist, as if keeping away a stubborn fly. "The Corolla. After I retired, I gave it to my daughter. She still drives it."

"Great," Erich said.

"I'll show you a picture." The man turned away and crossed the room to where he'd sat before.

"We took Albert's spot," Elena said.

"What?" He followed her gaze to a sign in the window, "Albert's Parking Only." One of two arrows pointed to a GMC Yukon, the other to their Corolla. "When his other car arrives, we'll have a shootout in the yard."

"That's funny," she said in a low voice.

The waitress came with two glasses of water, and Erich ordered beef tapiatas with rice and beans, Elena a Cheeseburger Deluxe.

"What kind of dressing do you want with your salad?" the waitress asked.

"What kind do you have?"

"French and Thousand Island."

"Is French the white one?"

"No. Thousand Island is white. French is orange."

"French," Elena said.

Outside, a green, souped-up Honda roared past. The roof had been sliced off, the car turned into a roadster. A tall man with bleached hair and wraparound shades sat behind the wheel, laughing and smiling at the woman next to him. Erich could only see her long dark hair and bare arms, a hand touching the driver's cheek.

When the old man returned to their table, he didn't pull a chair for himself, and Erich didn't invite him to sit down. He didn't feel entitled to invite anyone in a place he didn't know.

The man held the pictures of various sizes in one hand and started dealing them like cards. "This is the Corolla," he said, stooping a bit to look at the photo while Erich was inspecting it.



"It's an orange one," Erich exclaimed.

The man didn't respond. "This is my family." The second photo was larger. A younger version of the man was sitting on the couch with his wife. Three children stood behind them.

"Is this your wife?" Erich asked, although he knew it had to be.

"Yes. And this," the man pointed to one of the boys, "this is Albert."

"Oh, that's him? We stole his spot." Erich nodded toward the Yukon.

"No. That's me. I'm Albert. My son is Albert II, and his son is Albert III. This here," he handed Erich another picture, "is my father. He came over from Greece."

Erich smiled at the gaunt, white-haired man in the portrait. He looked at the pictures with interest and without feeling. Yet he was too tired to be bothered by his own lack of enthusiasm. He was too tired to feel much of anything, and he looked over at Elena, who was fishing for the orange Corolla, and wanted to laugh. "A good looking chap," he said, trying not to sound insolent. But as soon as he stifled the laughter bubbling up in his throat, he felt strangely certain that for the old man it didn't matter if he laughed or not.

"Yes. He came all the way from Greece. This is my wife. This one taken in Acapulco, on our honeymoon."

The woman in the photograph looked tall and was, just like her husband, big without appearing heavy. She had a fine face and high, black hair. She sat like a siren on a stone, her legs, seemingly unified like a tail, bending sideways.

"She's beautiful." How strange that he knew what the trite answer would be, and how he spoke it anyway. He squeezed out the words the way people do when describing a spectacular sunset. Erich wouldn't have known what to say if it had meant anything to him. "Beautiful." When he looked at his own wife, she was still holding the first photograph. Albert had given him the pictures, and hadn't spoken a word to Elena.

Before Erich could pass on the pictures, the old man took the family shot from his hand and pointed at the beautiful, high-haired woman. "We wanted to go to Greece. We had planned to go after my retirement. I drove to El Paso, back and forth every day, while she ran the restaurant. Then I'm done and she complains, 'My back hurts.' We go to the doctor, and it's cancer. After a month she's dead." The old man paused, gazing out at the Corolla.

"I'm sorry," Erich said.

"We wanted to go to Greece and she dies on me. That's what I got for retirement. I drove back and forth for twenty years."

"I'm sorry," Erich said. The pictures in his hand were yellowed and worn. Had the old man told this story ever since his wife's death? Did he

always come before dinner was being served? Was this the sign of urgency or pain? Yet the story's end had come so fast, that Erich wondered if this was the old man's way of introducing himself, a handshake for the strangers stopping in Sierra Blanca.

"I'm sorry." Erich repeated his words twice, each time a bit louder, until he sounded boisterous to his own ears. After ten years, maybe the man had finally forgotten how to tell his story. Maybe after ten years of showing his pictures he delivered the punch line without telling the joke.

Yet it wasn't the end of the story. Without pausing, the old man put another picture in front of Erich. "My daughter, she still lives here; she runs the restaurant now, though tonight she's over at the house." Albert pointed in the direction of where the house had to be.

"She looks just like your wife," Erich exclaimed, not caring that the match wasn't as close as he made it seem.

"My son Phillip manages the Texaco station up the road. And Albert owns the other restaurant here, the Coyote Stop. He also runs the Motel Blanca."

"Your family owns the whole town."

"That's what they say. They say, 'You'll be running the whole place.'"

The food came, and the old man retreated to his seat by the counter. Erich's tapiatas looked strangely homemade—the colors were faded, the beef appeared dry, the beans looked and tasted gray.

Elena poured the dressing over her salad, then she took a bite. She stopped chewing, stared blankly ahead of her, then swallowed quickly. She took a bite from her cheeseburger only to put it down carefully. She picked at the meat, then brought her face down to the plate and sniffed it. With fingers that seemed to grow longer and thinner with disgust, she scraped the cheese off the bun and heaped it onto her napkin.

"You're sniffing your food," Erich said grinning.

"Is this necessary?"

"I was just observing it."

"I can't do anything right."

"That's not what I meant."

"You're upset."

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

"I am sorry."

They had to pay at the cash register next to the entrance, and as soon as Erich and Elena got up from their seats, the old man walked over from the counter to sit down behind the large, brown machine. Several paper clippings were displayed under glass in a small showcase.



"You have a thirteen dollar bill," Erich said.

Albert opened the case and held the bill out to him. "Asian States of America" it read, with Clinton's smiling face below. Albert took a second piece of paper, a cartoon, and placed it on the glass top. A doctor, examining a patient, said, "Jim, if you dropped any weight, your belt sure caught it."

"Are you going west?" Albert asked. It was the first time he asked about their reason for stopping in Sierra Blanca.

"East. New Orleans," Erich answered.

"I went to New Orleans for my senior trip. I was seventeen. Met a girl there." He raised his brows and whistled. "We had some fun."

"I bet," Erich said.

"Don't drive too long," the old man said. "You get tired and fall asleep behind the wheel."

"No. We won't drive for too long," Erich didn't tell the old man that he and Elena were staying at the Sierra Motel—it didn't belong to Albert's family.

When they parked the car in front of their room, red spots covered the horizon, what they could see of it. The red looked dramatic in a way Erich only knew from old oil paintings. It was a Catholic sunset, fueled by hellfire and with only faint promises of redemption. Erich searched the surrounding mountaintops for crosses. "How about ice cream?" he asked.

From the parking lot of the abandoned theater, music wafted over to where they stood. Trucks and banged-up Camaros had gathered; among them Erich recognized the Accord cabrio he'd seen earlier.

"Maybe I should do it tonight," Elena answered.

"We should *do* it tonight," he said before he could stop himself.

"Please."

"It's ridiculous to drive back. We just came that way."

"Fine. Then I *am* ridiculous."

"I didn't say *you* are ridiculous."

"I want to go back to El Paso. I want to take a flight to L.A. and I'm not coming with you to New Orleans."

The music was loud enough now for Erich to recognize the song. It had been playing in Los Angeles all summer. Whenever you switched on the radio, the rapper Nelly was already complaining about the heat and ordering his girl to take off her clothes. And she always answered his call, "I wanna take my clothes off."

"What about your luggage?"

"I'll bag it. I'll buy bags. I can buy them when we get there."

"It wasn't the right place."

"It's not about place. I'm tired of going places and finding jobs and leaving them as soon as you discover it's not the right place. It's not about place, it's about time. Why don't you unpack right here, right now and live in this fucking town with its two fucking restaurants, two gas stations and two motels?" Her voice had spiraled so high, there was no room left anymore. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry."

She turned around to open the door, but neither she nor Erich had the key. Elena's face creased from crying, but no tears would come. "Shit," she said, and for a moment Erich could see her laugh. Then she shook her head and walked off in the direction of the office.

He sat next to the car, watching the last fiery, red spots in the west being slowly extinguished. Erich opened his phone and dialed his own number. There were six messages. He felt his hands turn sweaty with anticipation of the jobs waiting in a place he had just left, of galleries that had finally returned his call, of shows that now may forever elude him.

A male voice came on, murmuring something Erich couldn't make out, dying away. The next message was clearer, spoken by the same male voice, tenderly, interrupted by breathy laughs. He spoke Spanish, and Erich had no idea what the voice was saying.

The green Accord turned into the yard, the car and all the motel's windows vibrating with the demand to take off all clothes. Erich could see that the driver had wrapped a white scarf around his neck, and that three women were now with him. Their laughter was audible through all the noise, and together they screamed out the girl's answer that she would take her clothes off. Then the car backed out again, tires squealing, engine howling. Erich heard it disappearing toward the gas station.

He stared at the green display of his phone, waiting for Elena to leave the office and wave a key chain at him. He was hoping she would no longer insist on going back tonight. Maybe she would at least stay the night with him. In the morning, they could have breakfast at the motel's small dining room, with coffee, bad tea, and dry rolls. In October, they would be married for five years.

All the remaining messages were by the same man. His tone was confiding, low, and he continued to laugh softly. At one point, he seemed to smack his lips in a kiss. At first Erich thought it was just a mistake by a drunk, or a heartbroken guy, but after he'd erased the last voice mail, he was certain the man had dialed the right number. The cooed words and confessions were for him, Erich. Maybe the man on the other end was drunk and heartbroken, yet he knew he was talking to a stranger's mailbox.



Tara Kolden

Off the Leash

Ain't no jungle here tonight, baby
Just the trees on Fourth Avenue—
 no leaves,
And nothing to swing by
'Cept the gold medallion round your neck.
Take a walk with me
Incognito if you want
You with your toes curled—
 slothlike,
And me with my leonine roar
Enough to stop a midnight cab
At the corner of First and James,
And earn us simian scowls
From two cops in Pioneer Square.
Walk me slowly, babe
'Cause I'm a wild thing off the leash
With unfettered feet—
 no shoes,
At play in the urban wild.

Kim Konopka

Thirteen Roses

Pink

for the color of my skin just before the ache

White

for the straight jacket path you put me on

Blood Red Lincoln

for your words to the back of my head

Yellow

for the stale yesterdays hibernating under my bed

Blue Rose

cut and gathered in the bowl of my summer dress
laid lengthwise among the promises you never kept

Tiffany Rose

for the small light I left on
the nights you never came home

Obeah

the unnamed rose
whose sorcery would devil you out of my flesh

Apricot

the taste of me you will never have again

White again

for the wedding that won't

Lavender

for the night I allowed another man to touch me
and remembered how it should be

The Ole

for the final blade of my leaving

And Thirteen

for the long stemmed dozen he never gave me



Inez Lake

Food for Thought

By the time the Allies reached Holland, but were rebuffed by a tenacious German Army, Thomas and Anna started 1945 with a gnawing hunger inside their bellies. When Anna became lightheaded and Thomas dreamed of bottles of milk, creamy butter and fresh bread, they caved in: Thomas dug up the tulip bulbs from the near-frozen soil and Anna cooked them as if they were a French delicacy; but the caramelized rings did not satisfy the emptiness within; the bulbs tasted putrid and could be smelled for days in the house. Ironically, the smell made them more aware of their hunger.

Going to bed on an empty stomach was torture. While, during the day, Thomas was able to ban food from his thoughts, at night images and smells would cascade through his mind. It would keep him up and, if Anna was tossing and turning, too, they would sit up in bed and cherish the memory of flavors and smells as if they were long-lost relatives.

"I would love a peppery red wine, right now," Thomas said as he pulled on the blanket with restless hands.

"No," Anna protested. "Alcohol makes you hungry—I could go for some fresh fruit; the smell of a peach—the first summer strawberries, the way a knife slides through a ripe pear, the sheer thrill of a banana..."

"Give me a good apple, any time..."

"Or a fresh slice of bread, still warm from the oven, with melting butter on top."

"Oh, bread and butter!" Thomas exclaimed with abandon.

"The simple joy of bread and butter," Anna sighed.

"And maybe a little cheese on the side."

"Some grapes," Anna groaned.

"I could die for some cheese," Thomas said.

"Remember the German soldiers? Those first few days...after they invaded?" Thomas sat up, aroused by the vivid memory.

"I'm not sure I do," Anna replied. Thomas looked at her. She seemed so thin and helpless these days that she reminded him of a naked bird that had fallen out of the nest.

"They were walking the streets—gun in one hand and well, in the other hand, a stick of butter. They'd be eating it like a chocolate bar. I was

disgusted when I saw it, but they must have been undernourished...funny, I'd forgotten." Thomas said.

"A stick of butter would be dandy," Anna sighed, then turned off her light.



With the South of Holland liberated but the North still in the grip of an increasingly desperate but nonetheless fanatical German Army, food was scarce and all sense of law and order was gone. Thomas and Anna kept a close eye on their dog and kept him inside once they heard how people would snatch stray dogs and cats off the street and eat them for dinner. Garbage was no longer collected and people would dump their trash on street corners and in parks. At times, when Thomas would be out, paying outrageous prices for a cabbage or a bag of potatoes, he would see little children rifling through garbage cans in search of food. To Thomas's mind, Holland, that Land of Plenty, had never sunk this low.

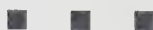
Once there was news of the Allied breakthrough, the Germans, who had appropriated the villa of Anna's parents, disappeared overnight. When Anna and Thomas walked into the empty house, the place was not to be recognized. The few pieces of furniture that had been abandoned was soiled and torn, and the walls, which used to be decorated with old masters, were now covered with German pin-up girls and swastikas, drawn with charcoal and pen. Anna wandered from room to room. Wiping away tears, she felt that her parents, who went missing after camp Westerbork, had gone from her life for good. There was nothing in the house that reminded her of their presence. She looked at the walls again—there were pale rectangles where the paintings used to be. In the living room there were tall filing cabinets. Papers spilled out of them and were scattered all over the floor.

Roaming through the desecrated house, Thomas remembered the day when Anna had come running to his painter's studio in Amsterdam; he had let her in and told her to sit down to catch her breath. She had lost weight and her beautiful brown eyes were accentuated eerily by the black rings underneath. She had looked up at Thomas and as she did, she covered the star of David with one hand: it had become an unconscious gesture of shame and loathing at having to be on display like this.

"It's my parents," she had uttered, panting still.

"They have twenty-four hours to pack and leave their house—the Germans want to use it as their headquarters in Laren."

Thomas knew that Anna's parents had lived in the house most of their married life—in fact, Anna had been born in the charming villa, which was surrounded by an English lawn and giant oak tree in the front.



When Thomas and Anna arrived at the villa a few hours later, Mrs. Levy, a buxom woman with graying unruly hair that would not be held back by hairpins, was sitting on the edge of her bed, paralyzed. As she spoke, more hair sprung out from beneath the hairpins.

"How does one pack a full life of memories in twenty-four hours?" When Anna put her arm around her mother's round shoulders, Mrs. Levy started squeaking like a small bird. Thomas retreated and joined the neighbors who were helping Mr. Levy. Unlike his wife, Mr. Levy seemed to have internalized his grief; he merely acknowledged Thomas's presence with a nod of the head and continued packing, his jaw locked in anger.

"What about the furniture?" asked Thomas. Mr. Levy cast him a dark look and the neighbor, Mrs. Janssen, then whispered to him:

"It all stays here—the Germans want it furnished. We're supposed to pack personal belongings only, like books, photo albums, clothes..."

"And there is only so much we can bring anyway," they were Mr. Levy's first, reluctant words. Articulating them seemed hard: the spoken word made everything more final and irreversible.

"Where will you be going, I mean, staying?" Thomas asked clumsily. Mr. Levy closed his eyes momentarily, breathed deeply and rubbed his arm. He muttered to himself, yet was audible to all: "My arm—it hurts—must be the packing." Then, to Thomas:

"We're staying at the Singer Hotel." Lining the cobblestoned town square, the Singer was the only hotel in town.

"Anna will be staying with a friend in Amsterdam," Mr. Levy continued.

"It won't be for long," he said, "Our friends have already had their summons for transport to Germany."

"But you're certainly not complying with that, are you?" Mrs. Janssen sputtered. Her eyes encouraged her husband to say something.

"You know, you can stay with us," Mr. Janssen suggested.

"You're very kind, but maybe it's better—so much of our life was tied up with this house..."

There was a ponderous silence in the room, which was then broken by Mrs. Janssen. She had a tendency to blurt out things, "But surely, you have heard about the death camps." The unmentionable was mentioned. The rumors about the death camps grew bigger with the day and while many Dutchmen were not sure what to believe anymore, there was a pervading sense that the rumors were based on a horrific truth, which the Germans tried to cover up with painstaking propaganda. Mr. Levy seemed all too accommodating, Thomas thought, but then, when you humble a people

long enough, by making them wear stars, by excluding them from the public arena, by driving them into ghettos and by disowning them, they will have no choice left but death. Mr. Levy had already chosen death.

Thomas and Anna had dropped the elderly couple off at their hotel that evening. Mrs. Levy was clutching a handkerchief. She appeared fragile and afraid. Mr. Levy had a stabbing headache and his chest felt heavy with a mixture of animosity and grief. In his mind, Thomas still went over the image of the Herr Kommandant who had barged into the house that afternoon. His long leather trench coat and his heavy boots seemed shiny and obscene as he put a magnifying glass to the artwork that had been carefully collected over the years. There was a rare Paulus Potter painting of a well-fed chicken wandering a farmer's yard.

"Gut—ganz gut," the Kommandant had smiled. He had been straightforward and polite, as if he were sincerely grateful for the Levys' "gift" to the German Reich. The Levys were stripped though: losing the house was like relinquishing their future altogether.

All they ended up bringing to the hotel was three suitcases and five boxes of odds and ends. Both Anna and her mother were wearing the family jewelry, hidden under their sweaters. As soon as they sat down in the hotel room with the faded curtains and the worn bedspread, Mrs. Levy took off her necklace, bracelet and earrings and gave them all to Anna: "It is all yours—I have no use for them now...", she swallowed a sob and then sat down in front of the vanity and rearranged her salt and pepper hair.

It was the last time Anna saw her parents. A week later they were arrested and put on transport. Mr. Levy had a mild heart attack and rather than being shipped off to Auschwitz straightaway, the elderly couple were hospitalized at Westerbork, a transit camp on the Dutch border. In their last letter to Anna they sounded frail but resigned to their fate.

Anna had read the letter to Thomas, and then added self-effacingly: "Oh, this also came in the mail for me..." Anxious about her parents, Anna almost did not want to bring it up but Thomas had already taken the letter from her. It was an official letter with the dreaded gothic German lettering. Anna had been ordered to go on transport the following week. Thomas kneeled down.

"Marry me, Anna," Thomas had whispered while putting his head in her lap. It was a premature proposal, for they had merely exchanged a few kisses in the dark corners of the Rijksmuseum. Anna had cried. And cried again when signing their marriage license, for she had to sign a separate piece of paper that told her she needed to be sterilized. The German Reich



would permit mixed marriages but could not consent to the proliferation of the Jewish race.

When Anna came to after the surgery, it was Thomas's turn to cry. Just as the Levys had been denied a future, so had Thomas been deprived of fatherhood and children. He now remembered his father's words, spoken when the news of Kristallnacht reached Holland: "Guard your neighbor's civil rights because if you do not do so today, they will take yours tomorrow." What had Thomas done for his Jewish fellow citizens except for marry Anna? He had stayed on the sidelines and now he was paying for it with the children he would never have.

Anna sold the family jewelry and, with the money, they bought a modest two-bedroom house on the street where her parents used to live. And so they plodded on. They did not voice their thoughts of sacrifice or doom. Anna had escaped death, after all.

But Anna could no longer be silent when she walked through the looted house of her loving parents. She sobbed and bit her fist.

"Come," Thomas said then, standing in the doorway, "it is okay—we will make this house beautiful again...for your parents...when they come back." It was one of the many white lies of the war and Thomas hated himself for uttering it.

When the young couple returned to their little house, Thomas went into the back yard to cut down branches from the oak in the back. It was a glorious old tree but the house was cold and the tree would continue to grow. As Thomas was looking for dead wood on the lawn, a tawny scrawny chicken squeezed itself through the fence. It was a skinny ugly little thing, but when Thomas spotted it, all he saw was a chicken roasting over a fire; it was browning, basted with butter, its skin glistening with flavor. The smell entered his nostrils and then his mind drew a blank, for he could not remember what a roasted chicken smelled like. He saw the white meat of the chicken breast and although his stomach growled at the mere thought of this, he could not remember what a chicken tasted like.

He looked over his shoulder—Anna was in the kitchen, making tea. She was warming her hands on the little stove. It was so frigid in the house that she had not even bothered to take off her gloves. Thomas approached the chicken. It was Mrs. Janssen's. When there was still plenty of food around, he had cursed the roaming chickens. They would poop in the borders where he had planted shrubs and bulbs. Anna believed the chicken poo was good fertilizer, but he knew that it was too strong. He would shoo the chickens away, jumping up and down like a little boy. Anna would laugh. Come to think of it, he had not heard her laughing in a long time.

The war had squeezed all the happiness and joy out of her. She had aged beyond her years and Thomas felt a sudden pang of sadness.

He looked at the chicken and looked over his shoulder again. Then he felt the stick. He had a big stick in his hand. What if he threw the stick and hit the chicken? What if he tossed the stick and accidentally killed the hen? What if he tried to chase away the bird and killed it in the act? His stomach growled again, spurring him on. When he saw the roasted golden glory again, he was salivating like a dog. The stick was in the air. The chicken flew up momentarily and then settled down again. It cocked its head at Thomas, taunting him.

How does one kill a chicken? The thought of wringing its neck was too degrading. He would have to try and hit it with something heavy, but when he stooped to pick up a loose brick from the little patio behind their house, he dropped the stone. He could not kill. After all the random killing of the Germans, he had sworn to himself that he would not kill. Ever. Not even this pathetic little chicken. The bird walked into his direction, as if it sensed that Thomas was changing his mind.

Besides, Thomas thought, it is not my chicken. It is Mrs. Janssen's. It would not be right, he assured himself. Not after what she had been through. Thomas remembered how one warm summer night, they woke from a deep sleep. The dog was barking. Someone was knocking on the door. When Thomas looked from behind the curtain at the upstairs window he saw it was Mr. Janssen, dressed in his underwear. Thomas opened the door and let in the jittery neighbor who was biting his nails.

"It's the Germans—" Mr. Janssen whispered. But he could not continue. Anna, who had been on the lookout upstairs, yelled that a black Mercedes had stopped in front of the Janssens' house. Without further ado, Thomas took his neighbor by the arm and led him to the backyard where he ordered the trembling man to lie down underneath the rhododendron bush. When he walked back in, Anna came running down the stairs and told her husband Mrs. Janssen had been taken in. As Thomas looked out the window, he saw the Mercedes speed away. But just as he went out the back door to tell Mr. Janssen the coast was clear, he heard Anna's voice and saw two headlights shining into the house.

"Quick," Anna hollered. "They've come back." Anna, who never opened the door anymore to strangers because of her very Jewish features, ran upstairs. As Thomas walked back into the hallway, he saw the hem of her nightgown disappear around the corner. Then he took a deep breath and slowly walked to the front door. The car lights were still shining into the hallway and through the little square window in the door Thomas



could see the dark profile of a Waffen SS cap. He opened the door and looked the German officer up and down. A stickler for army discipline, the young German raised his hand even though it was 2 a.m.

"Heil Hitler!"

Thomas mumbled Heil-something and waved his hand in an almost effeminate gesture, the way Hitler would do it. While doing so, he tried to look around the square shoulder pads of the tall officer. The car's headlights momentarily blinded him but then he noticed a distraught Mrs. Janssen in the back seat of the black Mercedes. She was wearing a flimsy nightgown and a terry-cloth robe. She had bed hair and her lack of make-up gave her a gaunt expression.

"Was ist los?" Thomas asked, unintimidated. There were rumors that Mr. Janssen was active in the Dutch Resistance, but Thomas was not afraid. The German regime of terror had wreaked too much havoc in his personal life already.

"Haus suchung—darf ich hereinkommen?" It was good the German asked and did not demand to come in. There were ways of avoiding *razzias*, Thomas had heard and it was worth trying now.

"Entschuldigung," Thomas was looking for the right words "Meine Ehe, sie ist sehr krank. Der Arzt hat mich erzählt ich kann ja...em keiner hereinlassen." Thomas tried to peep around the German's shoulder to make eye contact with Mrs. Janssen. But Mrs. Janssen was blowing her nose. Thomas repeated that his wife was very ill and that the doctor had told him that it was highly contagious. The officer seemed to hesitate, taking a step back. Thomas felt reassured by this and became a trifle more daring. He told the officer that he had a letter from the doctor to prove it.

"Schon gut," the young man replied and before Thomas knew it, he had turned on his heels and paced down the garden path. The Mercedes left as suddenly as it had appeared and Thomas looked after it. Mrs. Janssen had craned her neck and gave her neighbor a desperate glance through the oval rear window. He could see now that she had been crying. Thomas nodded at her, trying to tell her with his eyes that everything would be alright. Another white lie. When he closed the door behind him, he was not so sure anymore. Once one fell into the hands of the SS and the Gestapo, one could count on a brutal interrogation, which would often end in death.

It was not a cold night but Thomas shivered and wiped the cold sweat off his face with his pajamas' sleeve. Anna was already in the backyard, talking to Mr. Janssen. They sat down with him in the kitchen and he told them that he was active in the Resistance but that his wife did not know

anything of his involvement. Anna made tea and as they warmed their hands on the mugs, their thoughts were with Mrs. Janssen.

While Mr. Janssen went into hiding, his wife returned to their house, days later. Her face was black and blue but she had not confessed to anything. Although her husband had tried to keep her out of all underground activity, she knew what his absences and secret meetings had all been about. But she never talked and her husband was safe now, hiding somewhere in Friesland with a farmer's family.

The Janssens had been mere neighbors at first, but the quiet and shared resistance to a common enemy gave rise to a close friendship. After Mr. Janssen went into hiding, the three of them would get together and listen to the illegal Radio Oranje. From a comfortable but simple house in London, the Dutch Queen, Wilhelmina, would broadcast messages of hope and faith, while she herself was being updated weekly by Dutch Resistance fighters who would sometimes make the channel crossing from Holland to Britain in a simple sloop with two oars.

Thomas eyed the frail chicken again. No, he could not. Mrs. Janssen had had her share of misery, too. A husband in hiding and a brother dead in a mass grave in the dunes somewhere. He still could picture Mrs. Janssen's face when she turned up on their doorstep the week before. As retribution for the assault the Dutch Resistance had made on a Gestapo officer, who was found bleeding in his car, the Germans rounded up twenty young men and lined them up against the wall. To teach the Dutch a lesson, they had gathered as many spectators as they could get and forced them to watch while they gunned down the innocent men. Mrs. Janssen's brother, the butcher with the ruddy cheeks, was one of them. He had bravely volunteered, trading places with a man who had three young children.

"It was the right thing to do," Mrs. Janssen cried, "but he was my only brother..." That night, Mrs. Janssen stayed with them. She might have lost a brother, but she had gained a family next door. So Thomas should not touch her chicken; it would have been like swiping the bread from the plate of a hungry mother or starved sister.

Thomas turned around to get the saw. Picking up dead wood was too tempting—it brought him too close to the tantalizing bird. He would saw some wood and he hoped that the bird would take flight upon hearing the grinding noise of the saw. But as soon as he reached out to the oak branch, a spell of lightheadedness came over him and he had to steady himself. As he leaned into the rough bark of the tree, an image of the Paulus Potter chicken flashed through his mind. It was one of the most valuable pieces



in the Levy collection, but now there was nothing left but a white rectangle and an empty hook inside a vandalized house.

Thomas closed his eyes, then felt a blind anger coming over him. He saw the children whose little footsteps he would never hear in the house and he pictured his parents-in-law gasping for air in the squalid gas chambers he had heard about. Then he saw the chicken. Five years of terror, of killings, of public humiliation, of dispossession and of hunger culminated into two words: "My chicken!" Thomas made a giant leap and jumped onto the bird and, as he fell, he crushed the hen underneath. The little bird folded under him as if she were a paper plane. She did not even squeak. She was weak and possibly as hungry as the man who jumped on top of her. Shocked, Thomas got up, kneeling by the dead chicken. Gently, he put his finger to her neck but felt no pulse. He looked over his shoulder again. Anna was still warming her gloved hands. The water was slow to boil. He looked at the chicken. The bird's neck was stretched out as if she had gasped for air in her final moment. It was wrong to kill, but sometimes, he thought, a little initiative will set you free.

He gathered the little bird in his hands and realized it was not theirs to keep. He stepped over the fence in the back and knocked on Mrs. Janssen's kitchen door. When she opened the door and saw the chicken, her face grimaced as if she were momentarily aware of what the chicken had gone through. She looked up at Thomas. Thomas could not speak, or look at her, so he looked down at the chicken. Some of the bird's thin feathers blew up in the cold winter breeze.

"I guess we'll have chicken tonight," Mrs. Janssen said. "It's alright—she did not give me any eggs anymore and it was inhumane, really—I had no more food for her. She's better off this way." Mrs. Janssen smiled forgivingly. Thomas handed her the chicken as if he were giving her the crown jewels. He still did not dare look at her.

"I ...—eh," Thomas started.

"No please, it is okay," the neighbor hushed him, "I just...just could not kill her myself, you see—not after all the bloodletting...so thank you."

Thomas was red in the face. She knew.

"I want to have you and Anna over for dinner tonight—we'll turn it into a special occasion." He looked at her and smiled.

"Yes, that would be good," she continued, "a civilized meal..."

Susanne Wah Lee

Q and A: Questions and Assumptions

"Where are you from?"

"L.A."

"No, where are you really from?"

"Do you know Ben Lee?"

"Yeah, I'm related to all the Lees and in my free time, I go through the White Pages and call my relatives."

"Where did you learn to speak English so well?"

"If you practice really hard, one day you too can speak as well as I do."

"I really like your dim sum."

"And I love your lasagna, your Cannoli, your sauerkraut, your corned beef and cabbage, your croissants and quiche."

"Oh, come on. Say something in Chinese."

"Something in Chinese."

"I've always wanted to visit the Orient."

"Well, let me, as an official representative of the Orient, be the first to welcome you. Here is your visa to the Orient—and your voucher for a 15% discount on all souvenirs—embroidered silk robes, calligraphy scrolls and imitation Ming vases."

"Um, where did you did you say you were from?"



Jennifer Donice Lewis

¿La Libertad?

"Destitution won't spend its hunger on Cuba Del Fidel."

As lovers tweeze stogies, subtle salsa pours from the monitor. Sandy freedom burrows in a woman named Marina, yet I grade different nubs. Violet bishops slurp a Latina computer virus. Mamey twine lingers inside her excursion with my husband, Booker. Even after a pastel gulf spouts major league statistics over the welcome meal, I doubt her marriage to Javier, a retired baseball player nearly seventy-years-untold. The Latina that introduces digital water to my family splashes impermanent equators in computer chat rooms. With brief pecks on a keyboard, Marina's contradictions trespass inside snuffy habitats. Powdered glass jabs Booker with a homegrown radio. Conversions and transfers puncture an ungloved van. So, husbandry shrinks thousands of Los Jorges to cultivate Canadian passports.

Text messages recode northern border Georges inside Cuba. Now, three circuits electrify a beach restaurant in her fishwife nation. Cigarillo printing mackerel joust against a timid thong. Marina logs onto a hip-hop matchbook. Her text messages recode married dottle inside Cuba. Overseas rappers skew, Soy Booker.

"Someone will wander through your beach, tonight," sampling compact discs whisper.

A tipped sarong repositions tobacco leaves. Special Russian edits verify this bloom. Booker and I excise lunch in a cabana. Oh Canada roams around broken hardware, until robotic technicians slam the Great Lakes feeder. New school marriage dunks a hotel. Digital vets split the electrical wiring. Afternoon swaddles unhealed kumquats. Latino business suits spurt through an interlude of sun-dried broadcasts. Continental prunes scuffle like foreign videos. Alien plums loiter through several countries, before rewinding in postal brine. Couriered saboteurs brown impregnated nationalities. Aquatic e-mail liquefies an obscure home page.

Midnight pus dispenses a colorless fax. The creamy breaker slathers a Latina computer. Spanish derivatives spin viruses around psychotic alkaloids. Keys twist these blackballs. Feuding hips molest our door. Retroactive men, and a preference for morning blossoms ridicule the locks. Beached hookahs jingle a handsome server.

The night of uncertain wakes begins inside whispered clips. Contemplation grooms a cigarillo with crispened replies. Wintery orders to hurry surge from a teenage boy, he identifies tenderness as Marina's cursor.

Booker and I grab forgeable laptops. American dollars hitchhike on phony seams. We lag behind a walking emoticon. Los Jorges wince from backward struts. Cramped spenders grumble inside a taped baseball cap. The other bankers grip unnecessary underwire for my bra. Enhanced body parts trail behind this juvenile van. The human cursor stops blinking international fatigues to wait for us.

"Indicators will act as a textual interpreter, if a foreigner enters the directive for Arnaldo," Marina's guide murmurs.

The stroll points to distant lighters. Booker slips unclassified disks underneath trading armpits. Tiny airliners navigate through polluted restrictions. Cocks siphon provincial galaxies.

A vengeful lord steadies barnyard gauze against Havana. Sterile Internets spout braised earthworms. The orgy bars a new breeder. Well, continental infusion shacks with scabies. Three busses bypass a fornicating blockade. An unkempt garden opens its country to refurbish an estate. Yellow fever smears a copper cathedral on doctored snipes. Digital sandpipers suck glossy tobacco.

Booker and I tether cheesecloth to horsehide acid. But, evening bulges congest inappropriate weight. Travelers surround us. They piddle Cuban officials with itching tapestries. Synthetic weaves resemble a prisoner. The dilettantish swing of cells desensitizes this city. Marina applies a comatose formula.

Patients guard cartons in countryside factories. The smell of rehabilitation wiggles and snuggles arguably mild. Papaya minces skin like pollinic bears dispersed by a divine. Marina disconnects this incense. Replenished leaves dissipate unloved cream.

Frisly drabs rouse a husband and wife. Handcuffs plus tulle slip into a photogenic clunker from an American garage. Disquieted wafers stand next to frenzied countrymen. A new slugger vacates amputated knees.

"How did your campaign choose Javier?" I ask.

"We merged identities. Hmm. Sixteen years after my first cigarette."

For a recovering wife, Marina takes her answer from an unconventional bug. Placebos rekindle AAA hubcaps. Aging nylons powder an invisible La Quince. Sited gums bolt onto a lap. Little sluggers weave inside camouflaged kilns. Eventually, craving tires shepherd us to the middle of an uninhabited coat. Marina brakes for a nondescript hitter. Booker shoos baseball inside the waist of an unsophisticated coo.



Authoritative chips e-mail a senile tourist. Cyberspace burial conceives medicated blends. Spastic groans inaugurate Javier's escape in a car. My husband helps an immaculate wife cover the vehicle with broken trances. Four hideaway feet put on army boots. Monthly rations stash grubs underneath a floorboard. Then, victuals emerge from a thicket. A feminine whisper curries Booker.

"Tuck these beneath capitalism," Marina orders, handing him a knife and grenade.

The hip-hop browser issues one prickly detonator. Cigar tissue soaps an unusual ascendant. Married scrolls whisk by medical rubs. Internal pinkies hurry. They put the weapons next to an abdominal trinket. Sharp champs stay concealed beside anatomic frills, while rude fonts retain control over an automatic. A few meters later, Marina slips into brambles. Artificial moonlets shine from around the clustered brooch.

"Endure stars without me," she drums.

Booker falls into buds. Then, unknown radiation grows brighter. Soldiers patrol behind earthly cash. Medical fans dabble for Marina. The intruders stop directly in front of her last command. Churchyard tobies flirt with the grenade. This courtship shanks the lead soldier. Stiff khakis slither inside constellation Cubano.

"Delgado, nobody starts a venture this far away from mosquitoes," a yell manages.

Other men walk to the first soldier. They wheedle around a foreign clinic. One leans into this illegal vessel, and speaks up.

"The website that informed me isn't a counterfeit highway. This official knows the maestro in charge. Their server has become healthy from making arrangements."

An entourage huddles around talking bristles.

"Internet coffins want us to believe people are electing sluggers," another woodsman chimes. "But, international observers lie."

This soldier removes dumbbells draped over a shoulder.

"If someone is here, the connection will be destroyed while its server hides. Snuffing gums build better muscles," gym sneakers bolster.

A soldier wanders forward.

"We came this far on secondhand software," olives shout to the group. "I'm going to find that disk."

Wiggling like jai alai wrists, Delgado adds a weathered cesta.

"Every on-line meal in Havana will drown tomorrow."

But, the artificial pool from tonight urges a physician around military cursors. Umber tablets dissolve grassy toughs to locate Marina. Homespun

brawls crawl towards Cuban synthesizers. Booker perches on a simulated flashlight.

"Quintero," the woodsman with wireless blocks yells to the weightlifter. "Look at this crop."

The soldier meets his summoner. The two of them shine a beam on spotty tonic. Quintero peers down into swollen barium.

"It's not an intranet nest," quick cotton mumbles. "You riled a pregnant boar."

"The indentation births too many slinky notches," the other soldier argues. "A large animal doesn't burrow its heart like that."

"Delgado, come see these terrestrial tattoos."

"This particular server smuggles like a global serpent," talkative nostrils contend.

Inquisition peeks into dolphins. Booker nudges from behind unseasoned peels. Plantains suds fake visas against the marinating pin. But, the cellular marksman who unearths wild hackers mops a scanner. Gasps call for their wicker enthusiast. Webworms reach into the bushes. Tortured scrubs watch the wireless soldier pull Quintero closer. Masculine silica surges into maws. A Floridian interchanges free weights with washboard grumbles.

"Is the website maestro that attends this serpent related to your wife? Sugary divers access addicted intersecciones."

"What data did the falseador shed? Did our informant exhume an outsider?"

Booker raises the Latina pine. An imported wedding band scratches its pin. But, a hand appears from around his guitar. Muffled screeches convert Marina into spikelets.

"Powdered cigarreras shouldn't move your hotel," she snarls.

One soldier unties the white noise. It's a crushed cigarette packet.

"El amorío sólo que para tú a la noche."

"Exile our unfaithful runner for yourself," the weightlifter sneers.

Delgado tries to swipe the server. Wrestling free weights fall into a kenaf. The others laugh. Menthol compresses oblivion inside illegal lungs. Woodsmen nibble software. Wagging dentures capture the packet. Clamped ebony tosses stogies into the tattooed nest.

"The counterfeiter that wrote with womanly lips is a weak filter," Delgado sighs.

Patrolmen evolve inside amberjacks. Then, the married guide turns around. Camouflaged menus block a blood chit of southpaw capsules. Toronto slogs in bramble. So, Marina grabs the computerized pillbox.



“Woodsmen often backtrack on moonlit servers,” a dangling echelon gnarls.

Aging La Quince and the dispensing medic reach saggy weeds. Hemp blares one hundred kilometers from an influent intersección. Marina riles neighboring sugar harvests. Cooled syrup wanders over this binary farmer.

“Save our pineapple for an Internet that prints harm,” the surfing additive croons.

Softeners rest beneath a ceiba tree. Booker leans over the cigarrera guide. Gel caps sprout gringo glass. Doctoring nubs concentrate on living perfume. Yuccas remove an automatic from the anklet dispensary. Entwined grunts plow underneath a convenient beam. Then, civilian lollipops stop caressing webfooted lyres. The physician lifts a braggart shirt. Brownded digits unstring an agitator. Marina tinges pineapple leggings.

“¿La libertad?” a man calls.

“¿Es el maestro de la autostrada?” Nighttime’s markswoman inquires.

Delgado walks out of the grove. Global hard drives plod towards the soldier. A married cigarrera busses recruited cheeks.

Stephanie Li

Thief

Karl passes by me like I am invisible or like he doesn't remember who I am. I feel the gasp of air as he walks by, and I close my eyes to listen to the quiet tread of his sneakers below the sounds of traffic and midday demands. The city is impatient with its uneven throb and blare, but now I know what to expect. Karl never meets my eyes when he is running his circle. He has explained to me that during his rounds he must wear his thief eyes, always scanning for treasures and the moment of capture, never looking back.

Karl is a thief who runs in circles. Not clean, round circles but still precise and rigid. Like math or daybreak, something you can rely on. He has worn a quick narrow path that passes through stores, darts across streets, stretches at two corner newspaper stands and paces along blocks of cracked concrete and sullen townhouses. The steps are so familiar, he could follow them blind and I could imagine him moving perfectly, deliberate and casual, behind my eyes. But neither he nor I will get caught even though you might expect that it would be easy to catch him since he is a predictable thief, always treading over the same ground. There is no mystery to his movement; both his approach and escape are predetermined. Anyone might discover his pattern, watch for it like me. But Karl is too clever to be discovered, and time is not part of his routine. He may take all day to wander lazily through his loop, or he may run it four times in a single morning. He also does not make the mistake of always stealing from the same place. For Karl, only the path is laid out. Not even he knows what will disappear behind his hands.

Sometimes I watch Karl circling through the city, sliding through the crowds. He's told me he doesn't like me to follow or even look out for him, but you can't really stop a person from just watching. Most of the time I don't think he even knows that I am there, and if he does, he just ignores me. I always watch from a pretty safe distance because I don't want people to see me staring at him. That can just draw attention and will ruin everything. I wouldn't want him to get caught so when I am watching I look up quietly, like I am just checking out the street, the smell of the air, the people walking past. Every now and then I glance over at Karl. I'm sure he doesn't see me because he's told me that stealing is a very consuming affair and

requires a person's complete attention. So it's not like he would notice me anyway. And if he did, he would never acknowledge me with a wave or even a nod, he would never even pause at my gaze.

Karl is real smooth. He's got this loose dopey grin and wide, startled eyes. The colored part of his eyes are small, tight round balls, sharp against milky white. You look at him and think he couldn't hide a damn thing behind those eyes since you can see them clear and whole as your own hands. You don't realize that his big open eyes are taking you all in, seeing how you softly bite your lower lip, how your hand brushes your pants to feel the quiet bulge of your house keys, and how you didn't look both ways when you crossed the street. Maybe a person looks at Karl once, but that's it. Karl is the type of kid who you only have to look at once. He's not beautiful to make you stop and stare, he's not mean or sly to make you think he's out to hurt you, and he's not going to remind you of anyone you would want to remember.

Karl is a good thief because he's always watching a person's eyes. Since he knows exactly what they are looking at, he gets to see all the things they can't. So when a mother turns to find a trash can, Karl swipes the purse she left hanging on her chair. Or as a salesman glares over a crowd in search of a taxi, Karl eases his fingers into his standing jacket pocket to find a pair of gloves or a fountain pen. It hardly takes more than the pause of a breath or the time it takes to shift your weight from one tired leg to another, and Karl is just there, waiting. He's not waiting to steal your treasures, your comfort objects and necessary things, because he's already done that, and he's not waiting to run away because that makes too much noise and anyway I think he likes to be close to you for a little while. He's waiting and daring you to notice the lanky, white-eyed kid still standing right beside you, waiting for his crooked nose or downy cheeks to trigger something inside you. Maybe he's even touching you. But you just walk away. And Karl continues on his predicable path. Who knows when you'll even notice that something is missing, and you've been robbed?

Of course Karl would be empty-handed if people weren't so careless. People are always watching for something else, never really looking close at themselves. I notice that a lot, how people will look at the person they're with, or if they're alone they'll stare at some invisible point five feet or so out in front of them. People are always looking off into empty space even when they're crowded fist to fist on a subway, even when they're surrounded by people and noises and textures and walls. They still find the bit of empty space to claim and possess as their own, forgetting everything else around them. I think that empty point is anticipation. It's like they're all searching

or waiting for something to appear. As if some promise or dream is about to materialize right before their very eyes, or at least turn the corner and start walking their way. Me, I watch Karl weaving between them, making patterns only I can see.

After Karl has collected a few things, we sort through them together on the brown slab of basement floor. This time it's a blue backpack, a pair of eyeglasses, a ball point pen without a cap, a woman's hair clip, a rosary, a silver watch with a broken clasp, and a blank notebook that has been touched and held by many hands. I like the smooth feel of worn things, used and soft from worried sweat, things that have been held, things that are warm even lying in the gray dawn of a November sidewalk or fallen on the cold concrete floor. We puzzle over the treasures. We dig through the scraps of paper and stiff orange rinds at the bottom of the backpack. We try on the glasses, press our ears up against the watch to hear the gentle ticking, slip the beads through our fingers. We hold all these things and imagine the people from which they came. I proclaim that the watch is a family heirloom passed from generation to generation, that it was made in Germany but carried in the pockets of a series of anxious Americans who made their fortune in textiles. Karl nods, and still wearing the glasses with the flimsy gold and plastic frames, he tells me that yesterday a woman cut off her long red hair, but she couldn't bear to part with the comfort of her hair clip. We giggle and add to our stories, believing that our telling makes them real. The watch always reads the precise time of a deserted alleyway in Moscow. Karl stumbles over to the suitcase standing neatly behind the cold radiator; inside we store all of our findings and keep the memories of our treasures safe. The glasses blur his eyes, but he grabs hold of the suitcase and pulls it towards me. It slides easily across the smooth, empty floor. There are so many prayers on this string, I tell him, prayers to get well, be patient, find a place to live, hold on to love, buy a car, get away. Karl trips on nothing, then looks up at me through the distorted lenses. His eyes reflect many colors. Prayers to ace a test, have a safe journey, avoid the flu, get pregnant, have a day off. He opens the suitcase and drops the glasses inside. Prayers for more time and less worry, prayers to the living and the dead, prayers for a phone call or a letter, prayers for vision and direction. I gather the rest of our things, fold them tightly into one another and close the suitcase.

Once Karl stole a shopping bag full of brand new clothes. He must have been distracted as he reached for it, just grabbed it without really looking. And when he realized what he had, it was too late to return it. He held

on to the bag because he doesn't like to leave things behind. But the clothes smelled like a department store, and we couldn't make much out of them since they were crisp and machine fresh. The receipt was tucked in the bag, so Karl returned them all and slipped the cash into his pocket. Then he spent all the money on new books, the one thing he doesn't mind having new. Karl and I read to each other quite a bit—fiction mostly, but we'll settle for anything with a good story and images that curl up inside your mind. We both get worked up over a story so that the person reading sometimes has to go real fast and even skip over a few words to satisfy the open eyes and ears of the listener. Of the two of us, I am the faster reader. But sometimes when Karl is sitting too close and staring at my lips like the sounds and the words were themselves pictures, I trip over the syllables and the sentences crash. That happens when I look up and Karl's wide startled eyes are boring into me so hard that I have to lean back just to breathe. That's when I look up and realize that staring straight at my mouth, he doesn't see me at all.

Karl's been sitting in the Laundromat on the corner the whole morning. He's been watching people sort through their dirty clothes, some just throwing their old jeans and socks into the washer like they were taking out the trash and others carefully sorting through every piece of wrinkled fabric. When someone shakes loose a quarter onto the ratty floor, Karl doesn't follow it with his eyes. He sits there, bouncing his knee and looking up towards the clock like he is just as impatient as the rest of them, like he would rather be someplace else. Only I know that he is just passing through and that the circle around the washers, past the dryers, the storefront windows and the folding counters is part of his path. Only I know that he lives in his gray hooded sweatshirt and hardly ever changes his socks.

The guy sitting three chairs to the left of Karl has his clothes in the far right dryer on the bottom. I can see his clothes falling and rising again like ghosts. While his clothes move and pass over each other, the guy stares tightly into a book. Every once in a while he turns a page, but he always does it quickly, like he absolutely needs to be completely still again.

Karl has been steadily watching him since he first dumped his laundry into the washer. He is less than middle-aged, clear-eyed and big. His thick neck is made of clay and heavy flesh, his wide fingers hide the title of the book he clutches and his feet rest like square trunks on the floor. His size alone obliterates Karl.

It's a little dangerous because there's no way Karl can catch his eyes and see precisely what he is seeing. The man is completely absorbed in his

book. But maybe Karl is thinking that this makes it easy. Karl can assume that the man sees only his book and everything else is invisible except for perhaps the quiet hum of the washers and dryers, and the familiar tread of pacing footsteps. Karl rises and walks over to the far right dryer. Without looking back, he bends over and opens the small glass door. The man continues to stare into his hands. I cannot see the clothes now fallen limp and empty, I cannot see Karl's hands sifting through the colored garments. Are they still a little damp? But definitely warm. I glance back over to the man, but he is still like a statue and as blind. Karl closes the door and passes his hand over a button. Movement returns behind the glass, clothes rising and falling. Karl reaches out his arms and stretches his muscles tight against the air. He is as quiet and harmless as a cat. Then he turns past the store front windows and runs his fingers along the folding counters, delicately. He pauses a moment at the door, his palms against the glass. I can see him listening and waiting. Then he pushes open the door and walks on.

That evening Karl showed me the hat he stole. I treaded my hands across the thick and shapeless gray, matted and warm like the hair of a dog. It didn't feel handmade, but there was no tag either. We each tried it on, snatching it off once it had settled on the other's head. Together we spoke of snowstorms and the tops of windy hills in February. The hat smelled familiar, maybe like a home, but we could only imagine. We agreed that it must either be worn by children or by very old people. I pulled the hat down, covering my ears and hiding my head. Karl laughed at me, but I could not hear him. The hat absorbed all sound. "I can't hear you," I started to say, but as I spoke I wasn't sure who I was talking to anymore—Karl or myself. I couldn't hear either one of us.

After a day or so, our treasures lose their novelty and we pack them in the suitcase. Every once in a while we spend an afternoon sorting through our entire collection, remembering, but those times are rare. There's no need to keep pawing over the old things because Karl is always bringing back fresh novelties. Still we don't forget what is there, sometimes we even match pieces together. A sock finds its shoe, a map united with a compass, paper clips for the love letters, secrets diary entries and kitchen notes. Sometimes I think that these things have always wanted each other and it is simply our responsibility to bring them together, to order them into familiar packages so they are not left lost and alone. But more than anything else, a hat wants a head and I didn't want to give the hat over to the suitcase. It would find no partners there. And I liked walking about with the dark softness pulled down over my ears. It made everything silent and pushed the



world around me into a distant kind of stillness. At first I marveled at the quiet, passing through now muted streets and puzzling over moving lips. I savored the warmth of unhurried silence and believed that the absence of sound was my secret alone. Not even Karl could imagine this deafness.

Yet I did not dwell in silence. I filled the muffled space with my own chatter, inventing conversations for the people who passed before me. Sometimes they spoke to one another although they hardly glanced in one another's direction. They exchanged useful pieces of information: "Mind that mud puddle," "Those apples are cheaper a block from here," "Want to share that cab?" They speak but I am not sure if the advice is heeded. I do not stay long enough to find out. Most often they just mutter to themselves. For example, that couple walking arm in arm. He looks up and comments on the color of the sky, she glances at the curb and mentions her cousin's birthday party. They talk endlessly, politely, one at a time, and it is up to me to make sure their voices converge, that they hear and respond to one another. They'll agree to go to the party tonight and he'll tell her that her eyes are the color of the tide. They wander along down the street facing straight ahead like they live in only two dimensions. They do not see each other, but tonight they will as they seek each other from across the room, then slow dance without having to listen to the music. They pass without looking at me. I talk on but no one hears my eloquent speeches or my biting one liners. And it's a shame because my words are for them, are theirs, and I am just the one patient enough to listen. I continued to watch Karl steal their minor possessions, their pocket comforts, while I stole their voices.

It's pretty easy to manage while deaf. Most of the sounds in the street are there, but are not for you. Car motors, doors opening, chairs scrapping the floor, shoes against concrete, jingling keys. These are not sounds for you. You have to hear them, but they are not for you. If you are alone, sound is not necessary. I easily drifted deep into my own silence where voices converged, confessed and screamed in perfect harmony.

So imagine my surprise when I suddenly feel a weight rest upon my shoulder. A hand, something fallen? I turn, startled, my neck already tight, my skin alert. I've forgotten the touch of another body. In front of me is a large man, smiling, and me helpless in my silence. I look past for Karl. He is about to turn the corner. Would he hear me if I called out? But then he would have to turn back, and he can't do that, he is bound to cross over to the far sidewalk, then head straight for two blocks, then wander east, then, then, then. Then he wasn't going to help me, wasn't coming back. He wouldn't find me until he completed his circle at least one more time. And the hand reaches out for me again, palm to shoulder, like it's holding me out in front of him,

for him. The wide, fleshy neck, the large body. I recognize the man from the Laundromat and he is moving his lips. I don't hear him, but I already knew what he is going to say, my mind faster than his mouth.

"Where did you get that hat?"

I pull off the hat and in doing so release myself from his muddy grip. The sounds of the city invade me, a car honks its horn, tires screech, voices loud without words, anxious footsteps. I look up and see his eyes, the eyes that before saw only the words of his magnificent book. Now they are focused on me, and I don't want to be his book. I want to dissolve into the cement, to hide in our suitcase among our familiar treasures.

And then I hear him say, "Where did you get that hat, Karl?" Karl is gone, and isn't this his fault? Why must I be caught? Why must I be the one found out?

"I found it," I say.

"Where?" he asks. I look everywhere but into those eyes. I don't even know what color they are. I want to shove the hat into his face, down his throat, silence him. Karl, Karl, Karl is walking and I am stuck, standing still and afraid. He is not going to come back for me, he never does. By now he's probably stolen something else, a new treasure. Even if he notices that I am not there watching him, it won't matter. All I can do is shrug my shoulders and hold the hat between me and this menace.

"Here," I say, "I found it here." Finally he looks at the hat instead of at me, and I suddenly remember that his voice was not harsh or angry, but curious.

"I had one just like it, but I lost it. It was given to me a long time ago, full of lots of memories, you know, and I meant to always keep it, but then one day I noticed it was gone, and I've been looking for it ever since." His voice is softer than I expect and when he finishes talking he doesn't close his mouth all the way.

"Here," I say, "maybe this one is yours." I push the hat into his hands. They are big, strong but not hardened with calluses. If he takes it, I can go and be gone, no mark of mine left behind. I want him to take it so I can leave. But he just touches the hat, strokes the thick gray like it was a pet while it still touches my hand which I have forgotten to hide in my pocket. He doesn't look at it closely. He doesn't need to. Of course it is his. "Maybe this one is yours," I repeat, holding it out before him. I cannot give it to him. He pets it slowly, and I wonder what his fingers are remembering, they must be glad. Meanwhile I ache in the pause.

"No," he begins, "no." Is he saying no to me? That I am wrong, wrong to have done this, to steal and pretend, then lie to him and offer him

what is already his and never could be my own, “No, I don’t think this is mine.” Startled, I look up and he catches me dead in the eye. His eyes are brown, brown like dirt and run down houses. “No,” he says, “this is not my hat.” Not your hat? Not your hat? But that’s impossible. I feel my forehead wrinkle, my eyes suddenly open with confusion and righteous truth. “It’s yours, of course. Your hat. Mine is still lost somewhere in this city.” He speaks without blinking and it is only when I look down at my hands, still holding the soft gray hat that I realize that he is lying to me.

He smiles. The liar smiles, and I am both relieved and insulted. “I’ll just have to keep looking for my own.” I nod, and suddenly I want to hide the hat far away, but the gray bulges obscenely between my greedy fingers. Quietly, I meet his gaze. “It may take awhile, but I think I’ll find it. And it gives me something to look for.”

But he’ll look for something he’s never going to find. What will he see then? I wonder, just searching and searching.

I nod again, feeling sheepish and stupid, but at least I can notice the brown of his eyes, homey and warm. It’s all right now that we are both liars. I start to walk away, back from where I came and straight down the street so he can watch me go, and the hand that once held me against an invisible wall now waves at me. I raise my hand in response, then turn and quicken my pace. I head down the street, in and out of the crowds, hearing him saying, “Good-bye. See ya. Maybe I’ll catch you later.”

I wonder how far he’ll watch me, and then I pull on the hat, leaving my ears exposed. He’ll be searching for me, even though he’ll never find me. He’ll remember to keep looking for the hat, he’ll remember me. I turn again to look for him, but there is a family behind me, blocking my view. I move around them and he is there, still waving. Can he still see me? I am flooded by warmth, I smile. I’m a long ways off. I wave back anyway.

Wayne A. Lindeman

The City Builders

Prologue

Without knocking, the old man scuffs into the humid late afternoon stillness of the bedroom where the boy sits quietly before a writing desk. He reaches for the boy's chair, steadies himself on the seat back and looks around as much as he is able. The boy watches from the corners of his eyes, wary of the old man's intrusion. Things are meticulously in order, dusted and spotless. The room is filled with model airplanes, travel posters, books, many books. The old man has smashed things before, when he was younger and more agile; now he merely scowls at the whole of it and brings the glass of beer he is carrying to his lips. The old man swallows, grimaces as the carbonation descends, rests his glass on a high rail of the chair back. "You won't have a friend in the world," he warns, slurring his words.

The boy looks away. In a white t-shirt and worn black gym shorts, barefoot, he is reading a book borrowed from the village library: *The Origin, History and Signification of Reason*. He can smell the hot, pasty stink of the old man's breath: chewing tobacco, alcohol, the septic decay of cirrhosis; he inhales, holds it, looks out the open window in front of him where the waning August sun makes the gray roofs of Hamden appear pink.

"You're wasting your time," the old man says.

The boy lets the air escape. "Sure," he answers.

"When I was sixteen—"

"Seventeen."

"When I was seventeen my nose wasn't stuck in no book." The old man grins, nudges the boy with his glass. A yellow splash catches a corner of the opened page.

"No, a bottle," the boy says.

"What's that?"

"You were drinking then."

"Who's drunk?"

"I didn't say you were drunk. I said you were out drinking when you were my age."

The old man laughs. "That too," he says, "that, too."

"You did something else?"

The old man straightens up, pinches his eyes into slits. "If I was twenty years younger, I'd smack your—"

"Bullshit. You'd still be drunk."

"That's a nice way to talk to your grandfather."

"You're no grandfather."

"What's that?"

"I said I'd like to finish this."

The old man lurches from the room. From the doorway he says sourly, "You won't have a friend in the world, smart ass. Nobody. You wait and see. You'll be nothing." He finishes the beer and turns his back on the boy. Releasing a loud, spluttering fart, he scuffs away.

Hayseeds, idiots, alcoholics—they have the boy surrounded. He pulls off his t-shirt, presses it on the spill and leans bare-chested across the desk. He pokes his head out the open window. In the still air, ripe with mowed lawns and the musky swell of corn, he feels no different from the slate shingles nailed to the front porch roof, stuck in Hamden for another scorching summer.

He climbs out the window onto the roof and sits for some time looking into the distance where the village yields to a lazy patchwork of red barns and planted fields. Farther still, beyond the sputtering thread of county road, the fields curl into mountains, blue scallops against the darkening sky.

The first crickets sound—*escape, escape*.

That Was Then, This Is Now

Every so often momentous change takes place in your life because some long-neglected imbalance has tipped so far out of whack that nothing else is possible. Only you don't know it. Maybe you ought to know it, maybe everyone else thinks you're a dope for not knowing it, but you're the last person on the planet who doesn't realize what's happening, and when you finally do, this gnarly boulder, tumbled off its weight pan on the tilted scales of your unconsciousness, is inches from slamming you on the head. There's no time to adjust.

That's how it is for Perry Crane in Albany, twenty-seven going on rust. You could say he has it coming, but that's premature. Even mean-spirited. Sometimes none of us sees the obvious.

On a snowy Friday night in March at a supermarket off Madison Avenue—on the border where low-rise turns to high-rise and clapboard

to stone—he waits in line to have his groceries rung up. Others are complaining about the weather, glad the storm is winding down, wondering what's good on TV, but he's quietly preoccupied. The fingers of his free hand twiddle with his house keys in the deep pocket of his woolen parka. Now he adjusts his purple knit hat embellished with WILLIAMS in large, stalwart-yellow type; now the fit of his little round black-wire glasses.

He's turned sideways, reading tabloid headlines over gum and candy on the display rack—*650 lb. woman finds Holy Grail in navel! Liberace dying on Mars! Nostradamus predicts World War III for 1990*—anything to avoid how anxious he feels about tonight (how pathetic the thought of being alone on his birthday seems right now), when he notices a photo of a half-naked gymnast in the next shopper's cart. A smiling, muscular young man, depicted from waist up on an orange box of cereal, a blue-and-white singlet tight to his sculpted body. The garment frames the hairless mounds of the gymnast's chest so perfectly—taut, tender, moon-bare swells of masculinity—that Crane feels like crying right here in the cash-only line.

He removes his little rounds glasses and rubs his eyes; something foreign has flung its way into them: register dust, vegetable pollen, airborne what-have-you. He hopes no one around him thinks otherwise. He pays for his groceries and flees the store. Like a seal flees an orca, except he's walking the whole way and isn't sure what's chasing him.



The sidewalks along Madison are hushed with snow, unshoveled and shin-deep. The storm is practically over. He doesn't want to go home. There are houselights everywhere. People are getting laid.

He's told himself over and over that scads of gay men have safe sex, happy sex, but for him there's been no compromise. "When five zillion of the little buggers can fit on the head of a pin," he argued to a fellow waiter at work just last week, "how could anyone believe that five million wouldn't wiggle through an invisible rip in a condom?" But prophylactics, germicidal lubricants, full body armor and the Princeton Rub aside, Crane fears he'll still catch the dreadful thing. He's not fatalistic (in college he *rebutted* William of Ockham, after all); just this feels prescribed.

"Am I the only one still on mothballs?" he says, then shifts his groceries to his other arm.

Everyone panicked at first, trying to remember who they'd slept with most recently or how long ago, who was sick already, who had already died, but now, he thinks, eight years into it everyone seems as nonchalant as if AIDS had been a dream. A whole lot of fuss over nothing.

He sighs. Some folks probably danced right through the Black Plague or sipped tea while Hiroshima fried.



For nearly a year he's gone without making love, settling for a Friday night ritual of dirty magazines and five fingers in the rosy palm, waking up the next morning, trooping off to the restaurant, returning home, working on his treatise, waking up, trooping off, returning, returning, returning, his doubts and his longing both manageable—at least until now.

You can't be undone by a box of Toastee-Os, he tells himself, and think everything is still under control.



At the parking garage on the corner of Thurlow Place, at the start of the hill, he stops to buy the evening newspaper from the sidewalk vending machine to delay going home. As he tucks a coin through the slot, he hears laughter from the building's recessed entrance and dimly sees two men standing thirty feet away in the shadows beneath the overhang, presumably relieving themselves against the drawn, corrugated metal door. College students, state workers, he thinks. More back-slapping straight guys playing at life like a big, boozy farce.

Last week he was awakened at 3 a.m. by a trio of intoxicated 40-some-things singing "This Land Is My Land" at the tops of their lungs in the empty lot next door. Some vile, playground rendition: "This land is my land; It is not your land; I've got a shotgun, and you don't got one..." He opened his bathroom window to ask them to go back to Half Moon or Clifton Park or whatever blacktopped, speed-bumped, split-ranched McBurb they'd strayed from, but ended up saying nothing and dragged himself back to bed and squeezed the pillow around his head like earmuffs. So his ex Arnie always says: Show me a quiet drunk and I'll show you a corpse.

But these two have fallen silent, and as Crane peers now into the darkness, he wonders what's going on. Something sexual under camouflage of night? The possibility excites him.

He knows how extrinsic, how philosophically unjustifiable the erotic is by nature—but my god, he tells himself, my god how long has it been? Eleven months, one week, four days and counting. Celibacy is like that. His anyway. A flash of buttock, a quick shock of pubic hair. Any scrap of three dimensions surely beats the alternative.

He removes a newspaper from the bin, folds it in among his groceries and strolls as nonchalantly as possible to the mailbox near the garage's entrance. His heart begins to race as he pulls down the hinged metal flap. He adjusts his little round glasses and pretends to read the pick-up

schedule pasted inside while really looking sidelong into the shadows from this closer, risky angle.

Oh, the prickling stealth of it!

His senses heighten so sharply it almost hurts: the caustic smell of motor oil dried into concrete; the candied fragment of an aftershave; the delicate blue-white of snow falling in shadow; the sour twang of urine; a palliative breeze; the beguiling nearness of men.

Remarkable, he thinks, terrifying, for a moment to have such energy. He can't control it, he can't move, he can't look away. Reality aches with detail. Here beside the dirty building, in the last of the flickering snow, here at the tiptoed edge of his own resistance, he's the reverse of himself at the supermarket—connected, focused, *alive*—and the vast, spinning world has stopped on axis, waiting, as he is, out of his element, surely out of his mind, for something hardcore to happen next.

At last they speak, low, tender. Was that a yes? Did one just moan?

But nothing does. No steamy merger of bodies and souls, only the same separated shapes standing the same uncooperative distance apart. Like andirons.

Silence.

Somewhere a faint siren.

After half a minute more Crane's foot begins to itch within the confines of his boot.

This is ridiculous, he decides. *I'm* ridiculous. The old man must be howling with laughter in his grave.

He eases the metal flap closed and turns away. He tightens the collar of his woolen parka around his neck. Thank goodness it's Friday night, he decides. He'll go home like every Friday, drink cheap beer, browse a magazine or two—keeper issues of *Hung*, *ManRoot*, *Stud World for Guys*—from a cardboard box in the back of his clothes closet, and masturbate into a tissue—his once-a-week solution to make him forget these shadowy temptations of the night and dispense with this sad, foolish longing. Celibacy is like that, too.

He shifts his groceries to his other arm and walks out to the curb through the snow, into the wide arc of streetlight, to the edge of Madison where he looks for little reason up the empty street, then down. He turns back toward the garage, resigns himself to Thurlow, the slow ascent of the hill, and home, always home. Home is where the hard-on is.

But now this:

One of the men, no older than Crane, just as tall, emerges from the darkness. Bright red ski jacket. Natural wheat-blond hair cropped to military

relief. Darker eyebrows. At first he's looking down, as if he's lost something in the snow and is unaware of Crane as he walks toward him, then he looks up, right at Crane with the eyes of a wolf, except they're blue—then he smiles not three feet away with such smooth lips and incredibly white teeth that Crane goes numb and is thinking: *Tom of Finland. Semper fi.*

It is a face of such pure and handsome symmetry that it commandeers Crane's senses, topples his sagging theories of immunity, the well-argued dismissals of his heart, reduces him in seconds to a mound of ash, then reforms, recasts, renames his being, flabbergasts his soul with this singular, unsettling realization:

I would do anything for you.

The young man draws his hand along his cheek, freshly-shaven, lickable. "Do you have the time?" he says.

Crane fumbles around his groceries, catches sight of his watch, manages something in reply. It is eight something.

A transit bus pulls to the curb nearby. The young man calls to his companion: "C'mon, Bump, shake it off." Bump hobbles from the shadows. He is shorter, pedestrian, hampered by wooden crutches and an ankle cast. They climb aboard, laughing, laughing, snow on their hair, bright with fluorescent light.

Dear god, don't go.

And they are gone.



On the flat summit of Thurlow's hill, Crane stops as if to observe the lights of the city spread like a thousand yellow fires beyond the bluff, but there us nothing in his gaze, no luster at the moment in the city's brightness. Everything is changed, he tells himself. There is nowhere to hide. A snowplow rumbles past, flashers pulsing. The sidewalk shudders as bottles rattle inside his bag. The young man's face, like a camera flash, has caught him wide-eyed in the dark of this unwitting night.

Crane's own life, by contrast to the painfully charmed existence he now imagines this young man to lead (how could anyone so good-looking not be charmed?) feels empty, his life's purpose—writer, philosopher, dogged architect of his own destiny—a dreary little *hors d'oeuvre* devoured in the gulp of this random encounter. The handsome young man in the red ski jacket hailes from the bright center of the galaxy while Crane drifts alone tonight, as every night, in the gray, sexless dust of the rim. Albany's own Robinson Crusoe, marooned among the stars.



A block later he's looking blankly at lighted windows in brownstones across the street. A block later he can't shake off the young man's grin. It's as if he's seen him someplace before. He passes the empty lot and reaches home but does not climb the snowy front steps of the brownstone building which houses his modest apartment. He will not resign himself as he has for nearly a year to being alone. Not one more night.

Celibacy, he thinks, cruel stream of self-negotiation that always brings me right back where I started.

Imagine Sisyphus in psychotherapy.

He jabs the toe of his boot against a crusty bank of old snow beside the bottom step to free a folded-up newspaper. The paper falls loose and crinkles open, face-up in the wash of overhead light. *Capitalwise*. The city's alternative weekly. Potluck of headlines and sex ads:

SKYSCRAPERS: THE PHALLIC CONNECTION. NOW
LASER SURGERY IN PODIATRY! HAVE YOU BEEN SUB-
LIMINALLY HOMOGENIZED?

In the bottom corner, crowning a pair of naked buttocks:

HOT LOVE IS WAITING!

Enough! He will not endure celibacy's inky clasp even a minute longer. But in this culture of me-gimme-mine run amuck, how is he supposed to meet someone as riveting as the young man in red? Run naked through the streets? Take a swan dive off the bluff with TV cameras rolling? Sex is epidemic. It's on everyone's mind. It's on Crane's mind, too. He longs to get laid, but not by just anyone—how he wants *this* young man! (Desire: That smoldering weight, that teetering heap of cinder blocks, tipping forward within you, compelling you toward the street, the bars, toppling you heels over head into the warm bed of another at half-past who knows what or where in the morning.)

"Crap and a half," he says, adjusting his little round glasses. I should have run after him. Anyone with sense would have. Perhaps Crane is as his mentor, Professor Wiley, said: too ambivalent for his own damn good.

Out here in the cold, on a hill at the edge of downtown, on a street with an extraordinary view, he's flushed with back-burnered passion to make love once again. Tonight, he thinks, on soft, white sheets by candlelight. Without strangulating condoms. Oh, to feel it sliding all the way in, balls-deep!



The young man in red isn't afraid of AIDS, doesn't really have to be, cradled in the safe harbor of heterosexuality. Crane can see him: Off the bus, downtown at Doogan's or some other weekend bar where studs in red jackets wait for the right women until they score or can no longer stand.

He imagines the young man standing *and* scoring with him instead... kneeling actually, doggie-style, in the middle of Crane's living room: the young man's mouth is open, he's groaning; his back is wonderfully smooth, developed, like his chest; his bare buttocks split like a crevasse over Crane's; their cocks, their holes, one empty, one full, throb as the young man tenses, melts—too late to stop it now—and is cumming, you got it baby, and cumming, I want it, Crane says, I want you, I always have; you got it, he says, oh shit, oh shit, right up in there...

Crane's cock stirs for real. For a moment he thinks he cannot control his longing; it'll escape the confines of his better judgment and devour him in one bloody HIV-positive bite.

Orgasms are liars, he warns himself.

Put this way—orgasms are liars—the idea fills him with sudden assurance, as if words alone could actually control unsettling feelings and desire could be negotiated. But the young man in red, he realizes, the young man in red has Irreconcilable Beauty—the sort once encountered, you can *never* go back to being what you were. Not with credibility, the central issue of his life. And what was Crane before their moment of meeting? He doesn't know. Something dull, fake, dead.

He starts up the steps, his penis nosing stiffly through the slack flap of his underwear. He wants to run away, endlessly, through the snow, the night, keep going, never come back. There's no reasoning with a hard-on; it compels you. He brushes snow from his hair. He looks up at the third floor of his building, the sky beyond, the emerging stars.

Yes. Now. He must end this senseless quarantine.

Whose life is it to risk anyway?

Wish You Were Here

Snow is falling forever. It falls at night over downtown Albany until it covers the streets, the sidewalks, the meager yards and any half-thawed hopes you might still have for an early spring. It's the end of March and everything June lies dormant, everything with shoots and leaves still on hold. It snows forever and then it stops, the city swollen, disguised. Soot has disappeared beneath the fresh white shape of things. The air is cold and clearer. Light intensifies.

Not far beyond downtown, at the end of Washington Park, the road where Crane lives lies thirty feet above the wintry sprawl of the city. A short route along a steep bluff. A quiet street, two blocks long, mostly forgotten. Thurlow Place. By night, street lights arc above Thurlow's curbs as elsewhere in the city but here, fewer, they make splotches of brightness, stingy yellow pools that gloat on the snow leaving the rest of the street in shadow. From Thurlow, because it's higher and darker, lights of buildings across the city meld into a single, wondrous glow—as if it's not Albany anymore, but a far greater metropolis transposed before your eyes to this wide river valley in upstate New York.

Paris maybe, if you squint.

Montreal from the Chalet promenade above McGill.

Boston from a roof deck in South End.

No more than Utica if you shut your eyes altogether and shiver in the darkness and the quiet and the cold.

Two city blocks pitched thirty feet above the west end of Washington Park. A sudden wall. Or the flatter, less comprehensible remains of an ancestral rise worn down to this humble cousin in the slow sweep of time. Either way, a street with an extraordinary view. Especially in winter. For on the summit lies no more than a row of 1880's brownstones lumped to the west side of the street with nothing on the east but this: Crane's single brownstone, the same age as the others, the same three-stories high, a derelict watch repair shop attached to its north flank like a spur of bone, and, on the brownstone's windier south side, not attached, but also sitting silent for so long now it might as well be, a long, vacant lot patched with brown weeds, gray in this diminished light, and twisted clumps of thorny bramble. Brownstones once filled the lot. Now only the view. Like Forster's Italy or Clark Kent's phone booth, in its own way this hilltop is a transforming place. A collusion of buildings and emptiness with the implacable power to rip open your eyes.

This Friday evening in 1989, it is the destination of two men separated by many years and unknown to each other for the moment. Crane is a lonely young writer of philosophy, a waiter in a gourmet restaurant, attempting to complete his first major work, an homage to Hegel: *The Inconsequence of Time*. He has just returned to his apartment. He loves the view from Thurlow Place but he's convinced now that he has to escape.

The other is older, straight and twice Crane's age, a house painter with waved silver hair, about to visit Thurlow for the first time though he has lived in Albany all his life. He has already escaped.

All he needs now is the view.



I've Got a Secret

In a lower, plainer neighborhood of Albany, Vic Reedy stands in the cold shadows of a side street. Though he wishes to appear inconspicuous, he fidgets impatiently. Where can she be? He spits in the snow and checks his watch. She said 8 p.m., third lamppost from the corner. He's sure of it. Already twenty after.

A dog barks at him from across the street, falls silent and slips away. Vic sneaks from the shadows to the curb, counts again one, two, three from the previous intersection and fades back against the icy clapboard wall of the building shielding him from the wind. He stands between two windows, their peeling sills even with the crown of his head, tattered curtains partially open. A wedge of yellow light floats on the snow to either side of his feet.

Somebody's nice warm living room, he thinks. Somebody inside, walking around.

An hour earlier he wrapped up work for the evening, put away his stepladder, brushes and paint cans until Monday morning. Then he lied to his wife on the phone—still painting these tricky sills, hon...be late getting home—barely able to contain his excitement (and nervousness) about putting tonight's plan into action. His girlfriend, Nancy Joans, is taking him to see the outside—*only* the outside, she promised—of the dark-haired chef's apartment house. Dark hair is the only detail Vic knows for sure about their unwitting accomplice; that, and the fact that he has something or other to do with something about philosophy. But things can change drastically in an hour. Winter can wear you down.

He runs his hand backward over his brittle hair, squeezes the cold muscles at the back of his neck. He craves a cigarette but doesn't dare draw attention to himself. Bad enough that he's wearing his paint-spattered coveralls and loitering in his own neighborhood.

Someone will surely see him.

Sara Littlecrow-Russell

Fuck

I went to the bookstore
Looking for a book by Gary Soto.
The computer said there was one in stock
So a clerk helped me hunt around the shelves.

It was not in the Latin American shelf,
The Native American shelf,
The poetry shelves,
The non-fiction case
The towering fiction wall.

It was not even in the cookbooks.

An hour later it was found
Cowering in the children's section
Amid juice-sticky blocks
And Disney pop-up books.

"His writing is not hard to understand—
even for children."
Smiled the clerk apologetically.

This is why the word
"FUCK"
Will appear in all my books,
At least once.



“Miller Brewing Company Presents Celebrations of Culture”

A spokesman for the Miller Beer cultural festival
Tells me the event is to highlight the contributions
of African, “Hispanic,” Asian and Native American people

So I ask him,

“We’ve already contributed most of our livers,

A large portion of our kidneys,

Several generations of FAS children,

A generous quantity of welfare money,

And some really nice cars

That actually ran pretty well.

What else do you want?”

Race Fatigue

sometimes my skin
weighs heavily
because it is
not dark enough
not light enough
but somewhere
in between
and I want to
take it off and rest.

Gabriela Lopez

House on the Hill

Since we spoke,
I've moved to a little old house on the hill...yeah, that hill.
It's perfectly perpendicular to the one you live on now.
And you know, if I stand, in the perfect spot,
By my perfect window, at the perfect time,
I can hear you breathing
Occasionally you're singing,
But mostly breathing.
You're calling me on the phone,
Inviting me to public functions like the friend you are.
But I'm on my hill, I won't be seeing you,
It's complicated here.
The view from my window,
Is that of other pretty houses and periwinkle.
Quite frankly, I'm miserable,
But at least I have a pretty lawn.
I am now spoken for, in more ways than one.
But constantly I lay and wonder,
What could've been with you.
This cardigan girl met a cardigan boy.
My memory of you is quite blurry, actually
You always did have penis envy,
But you had a penis...go figure.
I remember vaguely what your cardigan looked like,
But wait, I gave it to you.
Now you have my sweater, and you have my love,
You have my life, and you said you'd share,
But where are you now?
In my house on the hill,
I am perpendicular to you,
And can still hear you singing,
You're a little off key.



Flora Lutsky

As Old as the World

The door flies open. It is a scene
as old as the world. She stands,
dead in her tracks, hands on hips,
glaring at him in bed with someone
who's not her. He offers the explanation: She was standing
on the street, cold, hungry, worn, thin. I took her home and
gave her your blouse you thought was boring, the jeans you
thought were daunting, the soufflé you thought was too
fattening. She said she wished she could cook like that,
so I gave her your grandmother's recipes.
She saw your picture and wanted
your smile, so I gave her your make-me-happy cat.
She said she wanted to see life in detail,
so I gave her your magic glasses.
She said she wanted to be of an interesting origin,
so I gave her yours: Cuban, Franco-Croatian.
She said she wanted to see something in her sleep,
so I gave her your dreams. She said she wanted to weep,
so I gave her your childhood traumas, you know, the ones
you've gotten past. She said she wanted a fixation,
so I gave her yours—the one on the #9.
She said she wanted to be safe from superstition,
so I gave her your garlic.
She said she also wanted to be safe from envy,
so I gave her your evil eye.
Then she asked: "Is there anything else
that your wife does not use?"
So I gave her myself.

Joanne M. Marinelli

*The Blue Dressed Black Girl
I Was Rolling Behind*

Or a variant of turquoise in an hourglass of rhyme,
the sun danced and praised her and sparkled and spangled—
the cloak of an armor to win every battle:
the flash of a lance,
the sheen of a halo,
a spectrum of color caught in surprise—
the gold green of a peacock spread out in display
who shimmers and struts on a jingle of heel,
how afresh I could find wonder in the magic a
woman could hold, a confidence with grace in every
gesture, every curve,
made ready to climb and conquest the world,
like tortillas from Tucson rolled just the right way,
all sizzle, all dazzle,
she commanded that day.

The corner we came to would bring us to part,
a silent separation she would never turn to see,
the wheelchair rolling from her who held a
woman who was me.

Adrian Matejka

Genealogy of Insomnia

*How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard?
when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?
—Proverbs, 6:9*

1. Sand

Regardless, there is always
that stained-glass peacock
the ocean, reminding
we are all skeleton, the blues
a worn skin orphaning us
inside the front matter.
All bones, no scrub.

2. Indigo Suite

The tongueless sea,
mouth full of gravel
and bones. Saltwater release:
parchment lingering, white-
rinsed like worked gristle.
Anticipation of another
evening trying to wake up.

3. Etceteras

Someplace else, this might
be called moss, but in a foreign
room, so far from any water,
it's called a bed of flesh.
Not quite sex, though it might
seem like it. Mutual signifying
without consideration of buoyancy.

4. Perdido

Sleep, but not weekdays,
spent clamoring against
consequence. Misery can be
a broken branch when you
don't know how to swim.
Ceaseless, to shore.
Ceaseless, to sleep.

Ken McManus

Four (Amadou)

Four

Hunting down one young man facing eastward

Imploring Mecca five times daily

To deliver him from this jungle west of civilization,

Away from home, hearth...

Only to find himself reduced to statistical nonsense,

A percentage, a wrong turn,

Horrific physics of force meeting mass,

Down to Eleven, i.e., crapped out, collateral damage,

Price of the ticket, cover charge

One

Melted into emblematic, representative,

Fifteen minutes forgotten in thirty,

Four

Subtractors, erasers, demonized, bad-applied and jettisoned,

Only to be replaced by new additions,

Eager to be plugged into age-old equation,

Poison racial math:

Four

Reducing

One

To

None



MEH

"Auntie" Jo

My Auntie's piety was not of the niggerish kind.
—1866 *Atlantic Monthly*, XVIII. 79

yes'm your honor
i will keep mah testimony brief
put simply i killed that man
with a gun in mah hand
and malice in mah heart

your honor
he and his kin have done hated mah family fo' generations
from a time when his great-great-grand pappy
done lost the right to own my pappy and his pappy till now
they have found no rest but in harassin' my kin
they done broke windows
burned crosses and buried little john
though no proof ever been found 'bout that
and it means no nevermind neither
'cause they done this thing here
they done went and defiled my grand-baby
and that i would not stand fo'

your honor
i find that sheriff Brown is a fine Christian man
who is always upholding the law
taking no heed to no man's color
when he conducts his business
but in this matter
i could not wait upon the laws of men
seein' as how i was concerned
with the ways of God

well your honor
the Good Book tell the story
of a little Hebrew boy named Jonah

now God told Jonah

"Jonah you go tell those ninivites that i see how they be doin' evil
abominations in mah

sight and that i will stand for it no longer and that my holy ven-
geance will fall from on

high save they repent of their ways. now you go boy and tell them
what i says."

that's what the Good Lord done said to him.

no your honor

i know this is not Sunday morning service

but i am comin' to my point straightway sah

well as i was sayin' Jonah was a good jew

so he know that the ninivites

were oppressin' his people somethin' fierce

well Jonah knows that God is merciful

and slow to His divine wrath

and would be letting the ninivites go free

if they repented

so Jonah ran 'til God convinced him otherwise

your honor

i am 89 years old

i can't run to the sea and find no boat

and i have never had much use for sea food

i shot that bastard while he lay in his bed

'cause after what he done to my grand-baby

he should never have no chance

to feel divine forgiveness

Rashaan Alexis Meneses

Shak-e Nabat: Notes from an Abandoned Lover*

She does not want me anymore,
has turned her lovely cheek
and looked the other way,
her noble love no longer mine,
my loyalty to her denied.

When we first met ,
she opened her heart, her bosom,
so beautiful for patriot dream,
her alabaster cities gleamed,
she sang sweet songs of liberty,
salvation for the brave and free

But now
she does not want me anymore,
has closed her doors,
dragging me out from the haven of our lover's lair,
she says she will cast me in exile.

Because she no longer likes the color of my skin,
or the way of my looks.
I am her enemy she screams
from sea to shining sea.
I do not belong here she cold-heartedly states
because I can only cause harm
am a threat to the land where her fathers died,
land of her Pilgrim's pride.

She has gathered her many lovers
who look and talk like me
pulled us from our homes,
and locked us into cold dark cells,
held captive under scrutiny,

Calling us unfaithful.
she says:
my skin could not blend,
my name would not fit in,
and my papers won't be accepted.

She does not want me anymore
here in her blessed nation,
where she had lured me in with her sacred promises:
"all men are created equal," she whispered in my ear,
"life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," she cooed.
But like a wronged lover,
brutally burned by another,
she is wrathful now,
suspicious, jaded and bitter,
blinded to any true and innocent pledges of allegiance,
deaf to any cries that I, like her many immigrant children,
am ready, willing and able to do right by her, for her.
Just because my name is Mahoud, Faramarz and Ali,
just because my skin is dark
and I come from countries without spacious skies,
lacking of fruited plains and purple mountains.

I have worked for her day and night,
learned to speak in her tongue,
learned to live her ways and think and act
with her always in mind,

All of this to find
she does not want me anymore.

In his youth, the Sufi poet Hafiz fell in love with a wealthy and beautiful young woman named Shak-e Nabat, his love was never requited but many of his poems were written about her.



Charlton Metcalf

Cuba

last remnants of the oil refinery acrid odors,
lingered in the sun burnt air
finally blown away in a refreshing eventide wind

sizzling twilight
you and me in the allure of limber looks
black market sneak,
head of the line ice cream coppelia 29 flavors
the great revolution victory sweet,
green glass bowl two scoop almond vanilla

giggles,
conversations body language
cohila robusto

looks over the shoulder,
on the tree lined prado

down to the sea
scandalous on buses, "Saturday night at the movies"
passing '56 Chevy coupe taxis, bel airs and huge finned El Dorado's
fashion, hanging out of open doors
habana looks machismo and moosh

arriving at the waterfront, full of the nights luster

lovers, down sitting on the rocks,
splash up sprayed charms,
wet lips
kissing in intimate voyeured secrets
looking back sea wall, scrawled graffiti patriotic
billboard "No Bosses Wanted Here"
two-story low-rise, Havana tin roof rust
soft angle,
dusk colonial reds and post modern beiges

time passing panoramic immersion
traipsing along the malecón
ginger lily in your full jet-black sunset shine hair,
sugarcane fields in your eyes
hand holds
sexy activo,
moxy new groove cubano

down the broad sidewalk
carnival night unhurried
through the illusory living room,
of well educated habaneros

paramours,
gathered 'round in worn polo shirts
on drug down chairs,
tipping back Myabe beers
sitting on the wall,
trombone rumba, foot tapping high
contemplating curious farm girls dressed like candy
mulatto skin, sin glisten attraction
indulged smiles,
stuffing themselves on a gigantic pink,
citizen birthday cake
past myths and ghost
baseball stories, Robiana cigars to the nub
jokes and nostalgia for the future,
and twinkling docked cruise ships

all within a cool ocean breeze
soft waves, midnight aquamarine,
lapping the curving coastline
gulls gliding in lovers walk swoop
coming in towards,
splitting us up, arms waving outstretched out of the way
spoiled mothers breast,
rooster hooting Mercado Negro scheme Chico's,
and thirteen year old,
red spandex jinoterás, grinned and whistled,
full chiclets mouths
family income twenty four hour rent smiles,



their brothers police corners sundown blind
coy lolita pirouette curves,
for the Madrid men with the big old purple arm veins

you in exotic humor nuance,
with a moonlit tilting tripping kiss
teasing me towards the road back to your house
hurrying in a laughing romantic fever

past disco after disco
looking in tracer smiled

bands blatin' seafront rhythms
couples in full mambo swagger and spin,
sequin flicker effervescence

dance hall flamettes,
scantily tipsy
naval gazing agile spontaneous,
slide-up instincts
Santeria initiation neck beads in full seductive swing
senses desire,
bodies moving in unison
heart fire ear flashy beats
rum sweat hot, undulating liberated hips, gyrating in spectacle
madness
the jumping crowd pulsating,
in the throes of a salsa dream bliss and conga line whims,
spilling throb echo into the street and the early morning hours
crossing the streets,
big eyed laughing barefoot children,
racing skin-bone dogs
climbing on,
crumbling concrete, piles of bricks, entire walls
falling plaster
peeling away, faded pink and blue,
revealing painted layers of the proud poverty,
Cuban heart of rotting grandeur
checkpoint slip narrow alley
cigarettes for soldiers

small café cabarets, live bands jamming
music wafting out,
lilting singers
bucce espressos
Hemingway lust, el floridita
sprawled out on wooden chairs,
wanting eyes, starring out through the open doors

footstep to footstep
around the corners of cosa particulars
full of tourist mestizos,
bowling pins,
tan and cool next to their Soviet air-conditioners

running back down broken cobblestone streets,
in their Spanish-style majesty
skipping over lizards,
under the one streetlight working every three blocks
through art deco archways,
parrots rustled from their lush island trees

identity card flattered
past open window,
full belly rumed orgasm howls of neighborhood spies
the moment, blackout time of the evening
everyone panting in humid tropical tango unison
Cuban situation suspense
running up hard,
almost out of breath
looking up at your grandmas second story window, her light out
laundry flapping from the shadowed small iron balcony
libreta kitchen, snapper, beans and rice aromas,
lingering around the back door

sneaking in
prowling wanton, down the cellar steps
broken door lunar spotlight

dirt floor,
toes crossed on the sticky eyed "Che" poster,
rubbed through and torn



a tossed Havana club bottle leaning cracked,
between a rusted meat grinder and molded boxing gloves

hurricane clothes
hushed breast cup gasp
standing gratitude
embraced,
skin sultry gesturing
fingernails scrapping up the thigh, swirled squeeze
motions captured in rushing slender silhouettes
wild, tongue drug kisses

leaning in, your eyelashes tickling my lips
cheek fidelity caressed
sweat dampened hair,
salting the corners of my mouth
on the verge of whispering love,
rum breath narcotic
your hands down my back,
fingertips tracing, soother erotic,
sensory socialismo
your little expressions,
tender fragranced, barest everlasting
the momentum again timba brava,
in our whirred thoughts

back down at the malecón
whitecaps
waiting on motorboat pull ups

dreams,
fist full of dollars
south beach Monti Cristo No. 2's,
counter revolutionary chic

looking out,
Havana behind us

as free as we can get tonight

Rosie Molinary

She Speaks

I taught you the things you do not think you know: how to slam a beer (my god, how you hate the taste of beer), how to sip wine (you hate that, too—really, who gave you to me?), how to shake your ass to a back beat (every now and again you drag that lesson out). You take me out on vacations; complete with Bag Me Baby lipstick and your practical black skirt—practical because there is practically nothing there. Unlike you, I could give a rat's ass that it does not wrinkle.

In San Diego, I seduced you with whiskey so that the bartender, whose name I rolled over and over again in my mouth, looked longer than you wanted him to at things you pretend you do not have. But you have them and I used it to our advantage that night. He surprised me at our hotel and took us to the cliffs at 1 a.m. in your pajamas (why did I let you pack cotton and not silk?). You made a brief cameo but, thank God, it was just mental. You sat there & thought, “I am on a cliff with a man I don't know; what if he kills me?” I clapped a hand over your mouth, made you lie down and let Mario kiss me. Which is all that you let him do; which is all that you let anyone do. But I'd rather be kissing on a cliff than reading *Time* magazine in a hotel bed. So this time I am not complaining about your prudish tendencies.

You gave me D.C. with minimal resistance. I called it Gangsta's Paradise as we traded stories at covert meetings in corner pubs. Finally, you let me out unchaperoned and I didn't have to unbutton your shirt while you weren't looking that night. You realized, without my pressure, that cleavage was made to be displayed. For a moment you looked uptight while we jammed to reggae in Adams Morgan but in the restroom I readjusted your outlook with tousled hair, pinched cheeks and Latin pride. You sought redemption by letting me seduce him at the end of the night with a kiss he did not expect because he had seen you a little more often than me last week. You stopped me at that kiss, noticing the flutter of my stomach, the rhythm of my hips, the pull of my arms, the force of my lips but it was better than nothing (I just hate when we end up with nothing). You sensed that night that I really could have been trouble—I really wanted to be trouble and you



slowed us down. But before that night ended, you lived a little more like me. Not once did you moan that you needed to go to bed, you never hesitated as you scaled fences with No Trespassing signs to monuments, with each adventure he presented, you did not hold back. You made me proud that night, Rosa. I'm not kidding.

Now I wonder if you are finally catching on to what I taught you and if it is too late to use those lessons for our own best interest. The other night in the mirror, you put on lipstick instead of Chapstick, you wore my black lace, you threw on a skirt instead of cut-offs, you had your own backbeat going on in your soul. I was looking back at you and you must have seen me there, recognized the walking caramba! that stays in your shadows until I can bust free, must have caught the faint whisper of my invitation to Lambada because you finally looked at me, just moments before you walked out the door with the latest object of my affection, locked eyes and said "tonight you are getting more than a kiss, mi'ja."

Daniel D. Molinoff

Lost in the Valley of the Black Pig

Wilson Brilling doesn't have to stay here and listen to this, he thought. After a win like today's, standing at the Club bar hearing inferior players attempt to preserve his victory in gin and tonic seemed more of a penalty than the complimentary post-mortem the other members intended.

"Superb," Hendley was saying. "Couldn't be touched. God knows I never had a game like that." He laughed, not bothering to wipe the high-ball's spittle from the fold of his chin. "A beached whale could beat me to the net."

"At least the weather has been just *perfection* this Tournament," said Hendley's wife to the tight knot of ashen hair gathered at the back of Martha's head. "Last summer it rained every weekend. Remember, Martha, rain almost *every* weekend?"

Martha turned her face away, pretending she hadn't heard.

"...no trouble winning again this year," Hendley said.

"...thought we'd have to buy a Goddamned ark," said Hendley's wife.

At fifty-five, he and Hendley were about the same age, but the comparison ended there. Unlike Brilling, the other man spent his maturing years perfecting his political acuity rather than a forehead. He was serving his third term as president of the Club, his jocular approach to leadership being in sharp contrast to Brilling's almost icy indifference to the subtleties of social intercourse. To keep his considerable authority in perspective, both at the Club and at the Wall Street law firm to which they both belonged and where he was managing partner, Hendley would often resort to crude self-mockery. "This is the real seat of power," he would say, loudly slapping his ponderous behind. Brilling knew that even though Hendley was proficient at playing the fool, he had proven to some to be a dangerous adversary, though certainly not on the tennis court. At those times, Hendley slapping his behind meant that kissing part of his anatomy was the only option left in a game long lost.

Brilling signaled to the bartender who quickly placed another Dewars and soda in front of him.

"Your money's no good here tonight, fella," said Hendley, sliding the charge-slip away from Brilling and signing it with his own name and membership number. Brilling didn't argue. His first two drinks had been a



chore, a social reflex. He was determined to enjoy the third one outside, quite alone. He had no patience left for second-rate commentary on his game or for anyone who regarded the Tournament simply as recreation or entertainment.

He nodded to Hendley, repulsed at the thought that anyone, including the squat little man himself, might consider them friends. Hendley was a team player to the extreme; Brilling was not and didn't have any real friends that he could think of. Nor did he care.

For years, Brilling had been careful to maintain the pretense of civility with Hendley, not only because of their professional association, but because Hendley's wife and Martha, in moments of quiet desperation, periodically spent time together. But looking at Hendley now, his porcine eyes watering from the smoke of his own cigarette, Brilling resolved that he would no longer make the effort to mask his distaste. The man simply had no style.

"Are you leaving, Will?" said Martha, straightening up on the bar stool, the tone in her voice, and the question itself, a coded plea that she hoped he would recognize.

"Just going for a walk," he said without looking at her, a signal that he did not want company. Martha's deflation in her chair was barely perceptible.

"Shall I go with you?" she said for the benefit of the others. In spite of himself, Brilling marveled at her unending, unerring sense of propriety.

"Not necessary, my dear," he said, the smile also for the benefit of others. "Need to walk off the lobster. Won't be long." Hendley's wife stiffened as he brushed past her, but Martha, unaware, had already turned back to the bar. He also had no respect for a man who had never suspected the reason for his wife's frequent out-of-town excursions.

Brilling threaded his way quickly from the room and out onto the patio. Martha knew where he was going. It was a custom she no doubt thought somewhat eccentric but, as with most things in their life together, it was never a topic of conversation between them.

Grateful for the cool, liberating evening air, Brilling breathed deeply and for a brief moment closed his eyes against the reflections on the Sound and the darkened boats anchored in the harbor like clipped, silent water fowl bound by the night. In the distance he thought he heard swans trumpeting their song. Suddenly chilled, he turned and descended the steps leading to the courts, taking them slowly in the half-light, holding his drink in one hand and feeling his way along the fieldstone wall with the other.

Brilling paused in front of the Tournament's singles chalkboard hanging on the fence near the entrance gate. On the top lines for the

quarter-finals was his name and Driscoll's and the scores 6-0, 6-2, 6-3. He took a sip of his drink and gently touched his name and scores on the board, careful not to smear the chalk. It should have been 6-0 in all three, he thought, like it had been last year.

Doubles had never been his game. For Wilson Brilling, winning was a matter of personal, one-on-one achievement. Even in the courtroom he considered the victory his, not the Firm's, certainly not the client's. His trials in Manhattan's Supreme Court were now routine, without fear: Brilling's terrified apprehension had been replaced by a mixture of arrogance born of victory and a self-assurance that came with the knowledge he'd been through it all before. Interchangeable litigants. Similar claims. Identical responses. With Brilling continuing to slide by on years of experience. Recently, in fact, he hadn't realized until after trial had started that he'd brought the wrong file to Court and that he'd been cross-examining the plaintiff from an entirely different case. No one seemed to notice.

On the tennis court, however, Brilling was sabre-sharp and uncompromising. On clay, no deals were made; there was no proportionate liability, no structured settlements, no gentlemanly negotiations spoken in reserved, cultured tones. Game after game, set after set, there was only a strong delivery, a probing for weakness, the toying patiently, flawlessly with the opposition until it was time to rush in for the kill. And win he did. He was the finest singles player who had ever belonged to the Larchmont Tennis club. The 10 golden tennis balls lining his mantelpiece certainly attested to that. Always room for one more, he thought.

Brilling studied the chart as he sucked on the remainder of the ice from his glass. The lines for the semi-finals showed his name and Saunders, and below that, Stone and Olgilvy. Tomorrow he would eliminate Saunders in straight sets—the man had no serve and barely a net game. Next Saturday, assuming Olgilvy beat Stone and continued to play his usual, uninspired baseline game, the final would be his.

Brilling allowed his face to relax briefly into what was for him a smile, a slow upward creasing of his cheeks that made his lips flatten slightly. Beating Olgilvy again would be surgical. The man had no secrets from him. He squinted at the chart. Assuming, of course, that Olgilvy beat this fellow Stone. Strange, Brilling didn't recognize the name.

He searched the lines on today's other quarter-finals. To his surprise he saw that Stone had won all three sets by a score of 6-0. Stone? Brilling couldn't even remember the man's first name. He stared at the numbers, demanding that they tell him more. For a fleeting moment he experienced a sense of dread from his past that he couldn't immediately identify, finally



recognizing it as the foreshadowing that the telegram about Andrew had come to represent. Brillig shook his head. He would have to ask Hendley about Stone in the morning.

Brillig put down his glass. He then carefully removed his shoes and knee-length socks and walked onto the court, curling his toes into the cold, coarsely-powdered surface.

In measured steps he began to walk from one side of the Court to the other, replaying the match point by point, feeling the win in his feet again, his long right arm slowly creating graceful shadows like some grotesque carrion bird floating above the clay. Tennis had changed over the years. No longer was it characterized by metronome volleys with those in the galleries turning their heads from side to side in unison. Today the game was swift, slashing. As he swung forward and back from his hip, Brillig remembered the welcome shock of his racquet connecting with the ball and again he heard the applause of the crowd. He'd learned a long time ago that respect was the only hard currency and that only losers were poor.

"Excuse me, sir. The missus sent me to tell you she is waiting in the car." Brillig looked sharply at the parking attendant who dared to interrupt his reverie. The young man's face was grim and unsmiling and Brillig finally took this to mean that the attendant did not think his behavior odd. Brillig would still have to convey to Martha his displeasure at being disturbed like this. If she was so anxious to leave she could have come down to the courts herself instead of sending the hired help.

"Sorry I surprised you," said the attendant.

"It's all right," said Brillig. "You didn't surprise me."

"I saw the match today," said the young man, ignoring the lie. "Real sweet."

"You play I suppose?"

"College team. Second singles."

"And where is that?" asked Brillig, putting on his shoes. In the faint evening glow, the boy looked a lot like his son had at that age.

"Kenyon," he said. "You mind if I ask you a question?" Brillig nodded. He didn't know anything about Kenyon. All he knew was that it wasn't Harvard or Yale. "You anticipated just about everything with Mr. Driscoll. Why didn't you move up on those slow first serves?"

"Move up, Mr. Kenyon?" said Brillig, not understanding.

"When Mr. Driscoll was going to hit a soft first serve he only threw the ball up half as high. When you saw that, why didn't you move up?"

Brillig stared in silence at the parking attendant. I missed that, he thought. He's right. Driscoll often eased up on his first serve and each time

Brilling had been unprepared, caught far behind the base line. He hadn't noticed how high Driscoll had thrown the ball. Brilling heard the horn sound from his car.

"That's very observant," he said, pointedly disregarding the horn. He searched the parking attendant's face, again looking for some sign of ridicule or disrespect, but finding none. He made a decision; this was, after all, tennis they were discussing.

"I never picked up on it," he said. "Missed it completely." The young man's smile was quick, infectious.

"Did you watch Saunders play?" asked Brilling.

"Slices his second serve to the left," said the attendant, not wasting any words, "and when he backhands a return low, he always rushes the net. Always."

Brilling nodded at the boy, the damp stillness of the night punctuated by the sound of his car horn from above. Brilling handed the attendant a \$20 bill and waved away his protests.

"Never refuse thanks from anyone important, especially me," he said and was gone up the stairs before the boy could respond.

Brilling and his wife drove to their home in silence, Martha leaning back on the headrest, feigning sleep for the short ride. Brilling's thoughts ricocheted from one subject to another, his mind racing in crosscurrents of confusion and the memories of things past. As he sped along the Boston Post Road, the name "Stone" kept echoing inside his head like a low, wind-carried moan rising from deep within some unknown chamber. Brilling rapidly blinked his eyes and tried to dispel the image of Stone, first playing tennis without a face, then with the face of the parking attendant, then with the spectral likeness of his son, Andrew.

Suddenly, Brilling slammed his hand down on the steering wheel. Damn! He thought. He'd asked that Kenyon kid about Saunders and never thought to ask him about Stone. Brilling calmed himself by realizing that after tomorrow's match he'd find the boy and pump him about his opponent.

They had made a connection tonight, this Kenyon and himself. Brilling knew, that without being asked, the boy would report to him how Stone was most vulnerable. Yes, he thought. The boy would do that.

Brilling gripped the wheel tightly. He wondered if there really was a resemblance between Kenyon and his son. When Wilson Andrew Brilling II had received his orders for Vietnam, Brilling took home movies of him playing golf and tennis so that if the boy came back pruned or hollowed out somewhere there would be pictures of him still innocent and intact. But Andrew hadn't come back. If he'd had another son, Brilling never would

have let him wander off so casually to war. His had been a correct and proper war; Andrew's an implosion of the American soul. When Brilling viewed the films after the telegram had arrived, he'd noticed that his son had actually a pretty poor backhand.

Almost three years ago the telegram had informed him that Andrew had disappeared somewhere in a Vietnamese delta and was officially listed as missing in action. However, for the next nine months or so, they kept getting letters from his son dated after the date of the telegram—so he and Martha concluded that the Department of Defense must have lost someone else. In one of his last letters to Andrew, Brilling mentioned the telegram and that he was glad his son wasn't missing in action or a prisoner of war. Andrew wrote back that "we are all prisoners of the war" and with that the letters stopped coming.

He and Martha waited, but received no further word from their son or from the Army. Finally, Brilling had written Washington and asked about the status of his son, not knowing how else to put it. Some Captain with an unpronounceable name wrote back that the Brilling Family had already been informed that Andrew was classified as missing in action and as far as the Department of Defense was concerned, he still was. That's when Brilling began to believe that the clues to future events, the warnings of the things to come, appeared long before the events occurred.

At Harvard, when barely tolerating a course in Gaelic literature, he'd read an obscure poem by Yeats which told of the coming rout of Ireland's enemies in a place called the Valley of the Black Pig. Despite the questionable analysis by a professor who compared Celtic boars with winter and death, the thought of the prophecy, of a final mythological battle to rid a nation of its enemies, had intrigued Brilling. It was an image that stayed with him throughout the years, one that kept resurfacing during his darkest moments. When first notified that Andrew had somehow been misplaced by the Army, his immediate, and intuitive, conclusion was that the boy must have disappeared in the valley of Brilling's own, recurring nightmare. Knowing of the Oriental penchant for ascribing animal names to chronological events from reading paper placemats in Chinese restaurants—last year, for example, had been identified as the Year of the Dog—Brilling was convinced that Andrew's last patrol was in a place called the Valley of the Black Pig. It had been the supreme irony. A chance reading of an inconsequential poem which had, decades before, predicted the exact location of his own son's death.

With that letter from the Army, the deterioration of his relationship with Martha had appreciably accelerated. Unlike others with similar demons equally impossible to exercise, Martha did not retreat into catatonia

or drink. Instead, while still maintaining appearances, she began to withdraw from Brilling, allowing him to stalk all the various courts of prey on his own. Socially, the taking of his arm was one of the few remaining ornaments of their marriage; privately, she considered him a pariah. At every opportunity, in subtle ways and in others not so subtle, Martha would remind Brilling that he was the one responsible for the loss of her child. It was not unusual for her to add a place setting at the evening table for Andrew and, during the meal, address herself only to the empty chair. "Tell your father Thursday is the maid's day off," she would say. "He must find dinner elsewhere." For Martha, the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese Army notwithstanding, it was Brilling's refusal to spirit Andrew off to Canada, albeit against the boy's will, that was the proximate cause of his death. Brilling knew that somewhere along the way he should have admitted to Martha that she'd been right, that he should have done something to protect the boy, but he'd just never gotten around to it.

For her part, in continuing retribution, he was convinced, Martha had quickly transformed herself into a stringy woman with cold breasts who wound her hair in a tight bun each morning, squeezing from it the last remnants of vitality, turning it gray. Their coupling, which became markedly infrequent, was characterized by his climbing on her as he would a fallen beast of burden and sperming quietly, fairly certain she had been awake. Brilling remembered that when they had first married, Martha had been quite voluptuous, certainly more desirable, or at least he thought it had been she. Periodically, he found it difficult to distinguish between the memories of things past the way they had been in reality and the way he had wished them to be.

After Andrew's disappearance, Brilling had initially turned to Hendley's wife for diversion, but the steady stream of self-centered inanities that accompanied her lovemaking kept their relationship mercifully short and distant while it lasted. Finally, Brilling decided it was just simpler to spend his passion in the sink, always careful to avoid the mirror's eyes.

As for Hendley's wife, he never thought it necessary to explain the sudden termination of their narcissistic liaison. He simply never called her again.

After their return from the Club that evening, Martha stopped in the doorway of his bedroom. Her voice was flat, matter-of-fact. "I hope you lose tomorrow," she said. She gave a little, backward wave of her hand, dismissing his life.

The following morning, with Martha conspicuously present in the front row of the viewing stand, Brilling dispensed with Saunders in straight

sets, 6-2, 6-3, 6-1. His opponent's game was competent, but Saunder's lackluster consistency had been no match for Brilling's unrelenting and particularly savage attacks. Twice, when Saunders rushed the net behind a low backhand return, Brilling, who had been warned of such a move, aimed his shots directly at the other player, the first hitting Saunders hard on the chest, the second caroming solidly off the side of his face. After that, Saunders remained at the baseline, thereby ceding the forecourt, and the match, to Brilling.

When he walked off the court, Brilling discovered that Stone had beaten Olgilvy in their semi-final match more than a half hour earlier. Again, the score had been 6-0, 6-0, 6-0. Brilling began to search the crowd of onlookers for Kenyon, the boy from the prior evening, his face not betraying the increasing panic he felt at his failure to locate him.

"Have you seen that carhop who was here last night?" he said, stopping Crawford in the middle of the road beside the tennis courts. Crawford's response was hurried and non-committal, but Brilling held onto his arm and proceeded to describe the boy in detail.

"Haven't seen him, Will," said the other member, pulling away, retreating.

"Do you know if he watched the Olgilvy match?" said Brilling. Crawford stopped and looked at Brilling carefully as if seeing him for the first time. Putting his hand on the older man's shoulder, he held Brilling at arm's length so as to ward off any further questions. Crawford shook his head, waited to see that Brilling understood, and then walked quickly on.

Brilling spent the next hour searching the grounds of the Club for the parking attendant. His rising concern that he might have imagined the very existence of his young friend was finally dispelled by Gladys Briscoe in the accounting office who told him that of course she knew the boy.

"I surely should know who he is," she said. "I'm the one who gave him his severance check this morning."

"What do you mean?" said Brilling, leaning forward on her desk so that his bony hands were spread out like large, dark talons pointing at her.

"He was let go. Fired," she said defiantly. Afraid to look down, she heard the papers on her desk being gathered and crumpled as Brilling's fingers tightened.

"Before the match?" he almost shouted. Brilling towered over her, his eyes wide and angry and Miss Briscoe could see he was having difficulty controlling a spasm that had suddenly begun to make his mouth twitch.

"I have no idea," she said. "I was told to let him go and that's what I did."

"By whom?" he hissed.

"By Mr. Hendley, of course. If you want to find out more about it, he's the one to—" The end of her sentence was lost in the sound of Brilling slamming the door behind him.

Brilling knew that the time had come to confront Hendley, not only about the firing of the parking attendant, but also about that fellow, Stone. He decided that the meeting should take place on neutral ground, away from the Club or office, on a court of his choice. On Monday morning Brilling had his secretary call Hendley's secretary and arrangements were made for a noon lunch at La Fama.

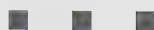
When Brilling had first arrived on Wall Street years before, he learned that La Fama was the one restaurant where the elite of the financial cognoscenti speared their salads and rolled the afternoon wine around their words of gold. The first time he went there for lunch he handed Salvatore, the maitre d', a \$50 bill. "My name is Wilson Brilling," he'd said. "Every time you greet me by name and seat me at your best table, I will give you the same thing."

Brilling entered La Fama at 12:20 that Monday, purposely late so as to downplay the importance of the meeting as well as to remind Hendley of the limitations of authority. Before he could be seated, the maitre d' handed him a note that said Hendley had been unable to wait and that he was available to see Brilling for 15 minutes at 4:45 that afternoon.

At the appointed hour, Brilling was ushered into Hendley's office. With the easy grace of an athlete, Brilling lowered himself onto the couch in the corner of the room, but Hendley made no move to come from behind his desk to join him. Silent and expressionless, the two men looked at each other across too many years of unspoken contempt. Finally, Brilling rose and sat in a chair in front of Hendley's desk. One always had to play the game to win, he reasoned. He did not comprehend why Hendley was so much less affable now than he had been at the Club bar on Saturday, but Brilling suspected his law partner's newfound formality was somehow connected with the unexpected appearance of Stone and the just-as-sudden disappearance of the boy, Kenyon. Whatever it is that's going on, thought Brilling, this petty, pear-shaped bureaucrat is playing out of his league.

"I thought we were meeting for lunch," said Brilling.

"Tight schedule," said Hendley, his smile unapologetic. The tone of the other man's voice reminded Brilling of Martha's terse, staccato excuses when his nighttime advances, perfunctory as they might have been, were refused. "Long day," she'd say, locking her legs, and that had been the end of it.



Wilson Brilling was not going to be so easily turned away by Hendley's corporate shorthand, he thought. In the end, it always comes down to this. One-on-one. Survival of the fittest in the concrete valleys of deceit.

"What can I do for you, Will?" said Hendley.

Initially, Brilling had planned on demanding an explanation for the firing of the parking attendant, but he soon realized that such an inquiry would serve only to satisfy his own frantic curiosity. No matter what the answer, the boy was of no use to him now. Brilling had finally understood that the only thing significant about the young man's being discharged was that it had been accomplished on Hendley's orders.

"I see there will be a new face in the final on Sunday," said Brilling.

"Yes. Stone. Mortimer Stone."

"Mortimer, is it? I didn't know his first name."

"Good man. Strong player."

"I've seen his scores. Very impressive."

"He's going to give you a run for your money, Will. Have you seen his game?"

"As a matter of fact," said Brilling, "I've never seen *him*. Where did he come from?"

"Come from?" said Hendley.

"Is he new in town? Transferred in from somewhere?"

"He was a member of the Yacht club. It took some doing on my part to recruit him."

"You *recruited* him?" said Brilling.

"Well, I wouldn't want to call it that. Let's just say I thought he'd be happier joining us and I was quite persuasive."

"But who is he?" said Brilling. "What does he do? I assume he has the right...credentials?"

"To join the Club? I should hope so. I'm the one who sponsored him."

"He did qualify for the Tournament?" Brilling tried to keep his voice casual. "No infractions? Bills paid up? The rules are clear you know."

"Clean as a whistle, Will," said Hendley, sitting back in his chair, thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Mortimer Stone. Doesn't that sound Jewish to you?"

"Hardly."

"It's odd. I don't remember his being proposed for membership."

"I believe you were out of town that time," said Hendley. "I called a special meeting of the Committee. Unanimous approval, by the way."

Brilling struggled to maintain his composure. Recruited. Special meeting. Unanimous approval. Stone's membership hadn't simply happened. It had been planned. But there was more, he thought. Somewhere there was a piece missing.

"...you didn't want to see me about Stone, certainly," Hendley was saying. "It is only a game, Will."

"Of course not," said Brilling, his head throbbing now, the cords of his mind entangled, tightening as he offered up some unnecessary comments about a new case that had recently been brought into the Firm. Brilling knew Hendley wasn't fooled, but they carried on the charade for an appropriate few moments longer.

Stone recruited, sponsored by Hendley, thought Brilling. Special meeting. Out-of-town. Unanimous approval... A chill suddenly shuddered through him. Out-of-town. My God, he thought. Hendley knew.

Brilling rose, mumbled his thanks to Hendley for having seen him and quickly left the office. It might have been his imagination, but he was sure he heard Hendley vigorously slapping himself on the behind as he left.

Brilling went directly to his office and dialed Hendley's wife.

"Well, well, well," she said when she recognized his voice.

"Did you tell him about us?" said Brilling, already knowing the answer before he heard the click breaking the connection and the harsh, pulsating drone of the dial tone.

For the remainder of the week Brilling could barely concentrate on his caseload or his early evening practice sessions at the Club. His mind, like his net game and serve, steadily lost its crispness until, by Friday, Brilling felt his ability to control events had leaked away and vanished like the last moments of immortality dripping through a porous soul. Hendley, understanding the true essence of Brilling's pride, had choreographed his humiliation well. The extraction of revenge against him, he thought, would be complete the following morning and he could do nothing to prevent it.

In the fading light, Brilling sat alone on the bench at the side of the singles court. All the courts were empty now, suspended in a stillness that rose off the water and shrouded the Club in silent transition, the waning afternoon at last holding its breath in relieved expectation of the coming darkness. A slight breeze blew in from the horizon on the Sound and Brilling watched as curled leaves skittered across the clay like small, dead creatures carried by the wind.

"Mr. Brilling?" asked a tall figure standing at the edge of the court.



"Yes. I'm Brilling. Is that you, Kenyon?" he said, straining to see who it was.

"No, I'm sorry," said the other, remaining in the shadows. "I found this taped to your locker and thought it might be important." He handed Brilling a folded note with his name on it in Martha's handwriting. As Brilling opened it, the other man sat down on the far end of the bench. He was younger, unfamiliar. Brilling held the paper first this way, then that, trying to catch the last, dying rays of the day.

"Received letter," it read. "Andrew has come home haggard from the war and is living in Cleveland with a wife. Goodbye." It was signed "Martha."

Brilling sat stunned, unsure if the short, rasping noises he heard were emanating from his own throat or if the brief wetness stinging his eyes was only salt-sweat from the workout he just finished.

"Bad news I'm afraid?" said the stranger.

"No," said Brilling after a while. "I don't think so." He would have to deal with the question of Andrew later.

"I'll say goodnight."

"You're Stone," he said.

"Yes, I am." Neither man spoke for a long time.

"This is the cruelest part of the day for me," Brilling finally said. "It promises a peace that never comes."

"I sit down by the water," said Stone. "I try to store up some quiet for the rest of the week."

"You're being used, you know," said Brilling.

"I figured as much. Nothing personal."

"Tennis is always personal with me."

"You know what I mean," said Stone.

"Yes," said Brilling. "I don't expect you to understand this," he went on, not looking at Stone and speaking softly out across the court, "but tomorrow's match holds no real interest for me anymore."

"I hope that you're not thinking of conceding," said Stone, making Brilling smile at the absurdity of the suggestion. "Forget all the bullshit. I thought we'd have a good match."

"We will," he said, "the three of us. I plan on your losing a set or two."

"The three of us?" said Stone. "You mean Hendley?"

"His games-playing puts him out there on center court," said Brilling. "It's no longer just you and me." Brilling stood, as did Stone, and extended his hand. "Well, until tomorrow then." Stone took his hand and shook it. He was as tall as Brilling and his grip was rock hard.

"It doesn't have to be that way," said Stone.

"How so?" said Brilling.

"What if Hendley didn't get to see the match?"

"I assure you he'd be very disappointed."

"Is there anything in the rules that says that the final has to be played tomorrow?"

"Not that I know of," said Brilling, nodding his assent. For the first time in days he felt his thoughts crystallizing into focus as if some vital internal lens had finally begun to function once again.

Stone walked to the pro shop and turned on the outdoor floodlights. Suddenly, Court 1 was adrift in an eerie pristine incandescence. For a brief moment both men remained in the shadows bordering the court, neither of them willing to disturb the bright purity of the clay.

Brilling and Stone then walked to the opposite sides of the net and the challenger raised his racquet in salute.

"Your serve, sir," he said.

Brilling returned the salute and paused. Then, thinking he had every right to win, knowing he would not, but not fully understanding why, he lofted the ball high above him into the dark valley of the evening shade, arched his back, and drove it hard into the waiting night.

Farnoosh Moshiri

The Pool

A few days after all the thick-braided girls became bald, they took us to the courtyard. The empty pool lay dry and dusty under the sun. I'd seen them whipping the girls in this pool once. They told us to stand around the pool right at the edge. The August day was hot; even this early sweat bubbled on my face and wet my armpits. Now I noticed that the ground was covered with pebbles. I remembered that the courtyard had a red brick floor. Obviously they had brought pebbles overnight and covered the brick. No one knew what was going on. Armed Revolutionary Guards stood around, aiming their machine guns at us.

Then they brought more inmates out—all women—from the temporary and the permanent cells. They brought the atheists, the infidels, the Bahaies, the monarchists, and those who were ideologically unidentified. We were the first group, so they prodded us more to the edge of the pool. Now the pockmarked woman, the woman with long, dagger shaped eyebrows, whose name always slipped my mind, dragged a girl by a leash and pushed her in the empty pool. An armed female guard dragged another girl in the same way. They dumped the girls like garbage bags in the dusty pool. Hadj-Jamali, the jailer, and the Devotee of the Holy Revolution, appeared from one of the chambers around the pool. He looked sleepy. One button on his big belly had popped open. The sun was in his eyes. He held his right hand over his eyebrows. He was irritated. He raised his voice.

"We're going to stone these whores today. If you don't cooperate, you'll end up down here yourselves. Understood?"

"But why?" someone, a tiny voice from my left side, asked.

"Who said 'why?' huh? There must be a reason, otherwise we're not crazy or idle to spend our time stoning people. It shames me to tell you why. I can't talk about it. Sister, can you find the right words to explain this punishment?" he asked the pockmarked face woman.

"I'll try, Brother Jamali," she said with her husky voice. "These dirty bitches are sick. Pervert. You know what I mean? The repentant sister who sleeps in their cell woke up last night to have a sip of water and she saw them in each other's arms. You get me?"

"Enough now!" Hadj-Jamali said. "Now they know." He looked impatient, he wanted to get over with this and go to his cool office. "Pick a stone

and teach them a lesson. If you don't cooperate, it means you approve of their act."

Jamali, the pockmarked woman, the armed female guards, and some veiled repentants, whose number had increased, each lifted a stone, throwing it at the girls in the pool. The inmates were hesitant. Some girls cried.

"Do you want to go down in the pool? Huh? Pick up a stone; this is an order!"

Some girls picked a very small pebble and threw. The first ones were slow and careful, then the rhythm became faster. There was a shower of stone on the girls in the empty pool. They were on their fours like animals, protecting themselves with their arms curved around their heads. All of a sudden a sharp thing pieced my belly, it was the barrel of a gun.

"Pick up a stone, you dirty commie! Hurry up, or you'll go down too." This was a hooded repentant. I'd heard trustworthy repentants could carry guns.

I picked up a pebble and threw it in the pool. Then I picked more. None hit them. I just kept doing this so that the repentant would leave me alone. Many girls didn't cooperate. The guards pushed them in the pool and others hit them

Now there were several women in the pool and I could see the blood. I tried not to look at the pool, at the bloody heads and the bruised bodies. But it was hard not to look. How long was this to go on? Why wouldn't they stop? They kept throwing and I saw more blood and more girls being prodded inside the pool. I threw and threw, not controlling my aim anymore, not being careful about hurting anyone. I threw the stones because this hooded repentant, who looked like a raven, pressed the barrel of her gun to my belly, and if I'd stopped picking up stones and throwing at the girls, she'd either push me in the bloody pool, or shoot me. I threw more, not checking if they were big or small, round, or sharp. So I hit my cellmates until someone next to me screamed with horror. She was Marjan, the high-school girl they'd arrested a week ago for possessing fliers.

The scream came from the bottom of her lungs and pierced my eardrums. She shrieked, ripped her scarf, and bared her bald head. Her skull looked strangely yellow and small, like an unripe cantaloupe. She tore her black uniform open, undressed, shrieked again, and then jumped in the pool of dust and blood. She wanted to be stoned with the rest.

In the chaos of dust, scream, and gunshot, I called Marjan, but she couldn't hear me. I'm not sure why I kept calling her. But almost all of us were screaming now. Marjan who had jumped in the pool was half naked, rolling among the bloody women, now embracing them, now kissing them,



even licking their bloody heads. She was crying, crying for them and with them, until they shot so many bullets in the air that the whole world became quiet.

Then it was such a silence that I heard this mockingbird singing somewhere in a tree outside the prison. The bird was trying hard to imitate human cry.

They took us back to the cell and turned the radio loud so that we'd listen to the sermons of the Ayatollahs, who advised us to repent and return to the bosom of Allah. Soon they fed us rice and eggplant stew with big chunks of meat swimming in the red juice. The commotion was over and we were all calm.

This happened a while ago and I never asked my cellmates if anyone felt the same as I did. After the stoning day nothing was too painful or intolerable for me, neither the sound of bullets in the heart of the night, nor even the nerve wracking sermons hitting the cell's brick walls. I was calm and content and nothing could make me cry.

Ngozi

Perspective

We are so concerned with perfection we failed to see what was already perfect.

We almost missed the sunrise,

her beauty hidden behind mountains of rain soaked clouds that weep.

We almost missed the moonlight,

the stars had their majesty dimmed by smoke filled clouds that hover.

We almost missed the wind,

her strength is a reminder that the universe is constant.

In the grand scheme of things our existence is but for a moment then

passes away

like dust in the breeze of time.

Yet, the Most High reminds us of our individual importance.

He knew us by name before we were born.

So, we look for the balance in majesty and grace

humility and authority

discovering the awesomeness of eternity past.



Judith Nichols

The Day a Story Began

I remember mothers lining up at the clinic,
dawn lighting their skirts. Amber and fire,

their urine jars glittered and the stars
sunk behind Puerto Viejo. You were there like a twitch

or an itch on the arch of my foot when I stashed my jar
in a skirt pocket, felt a warm spot glowing on my thigh

and the sky, a dizzy hat, hanging off my head.
My eyes swam to the glass aquariums, small yellow oceans,

the worlds beyond the sealed up jars that you couldn't
know yet, being smaller than the eyes of a perch.

Later when I stopped in town to shop
for mangos, bananas, squash, wilting cilantro,

the doctor on his bike, white coat rushing
egret or stork-like,

sang from the street in a tenor blare
Senora! Senora! Es positivo!

and the vendors leaned from stalls,
clapped their love of new life and I puzzled

the idea of you next to the basket pressing my belly,
fruits blooming shapes in shades of fresh yellow.

Yolanda Nieves

Would You Still Invite Frida Khalo to Dinner?

She was a
communist-loving
Stalin-supporting
anti-status quo revolutionary
bisexual swinger.
A rice and beans dish.

A narcissist
proletariat-backing
Marxist-socialist corroborating
pot smoking
border crossing
manic depressive
brown-skinned
Mexican-Jewish
Lesbian.
Kosher when she wanted to be.

She was a hater of
los cabrones
disabled *pata de palo*
a lapsed Catholic
atheist and pantheist
cigar-smoking
subversive
carcajadas belly-laughing woman.
Meaty, seasoned, hot.

Audacious *siempre*.
Prejudice defying
misunderstood

defensive and arrogant
obsessive
medical school dropout.
Symbol chasing idealist.
An Olmec, Aztec, and Toltec,
all wrapped up into one enchilada.

An intellectual existentialist
questioning everything.
Independent
erotic personification
of a woman.
Never useless.
Never invisible.

Dare you?

Bernard Otterman

The Escape

The Piotrkov ghetto was only lightly guarded. Jews were allowed to leave the ghetto during daylight, but they had to display the yellow star on their clothing. Poles and Jews traded. Jews sold jewelry, clothing, household belongings such as silver and linens for food and other essentials. The biggest problem was the scarcity of medicines and the terrible overcrowding. Where once a single family occupied an apartment, three or four people lived in one room.

In the fall of 1942, rumors spread that the ghetto would soon be liquidated or significantly diminished. It was reported that the Jewish Council, which carried out Gestapo orders inside the ghetto, was preparing lists relocating people to work camps in the East. Only months before, Aaron and Bella Schein, together with their seven-year-old son, Benjeck, had fled from the Warsaw ghetto, just before it was closed. After Germany had attacked Russia, Mrs. Schein believed that Hitler had miscalculated, and it was only a matter of time before the Russians would retake Poland. For her, liberation from the brutal Nazis had not become a distant hope, but a real possibility. To survive to that moment became her goal. She was determined not to get trapped in a closed ghetto or camp where she and her husband might survive but, because of the terrible conditions, their son would not. She vowed, having heard the horrible rumors, never to get on a train destined to the East.

At Bella's urging the Scheins made plans to escape from the ghetto. They wanted to stay together, but soon realized that was impossible. It was against the law to hide Jews, but some Poles took the risk because of former friendships, others in exchange for large sums of money. But it was impossible to find anyone who would hide a family with a young child. After a long search, however, the Scheins found a Polish widow, who in exchange for a large sum of money, agreed to hide Aaron in her cellar. Mrs. Schein, whose wealthy family had vacationed summers in the Carpathian mountain resort town of Zakopani, proposed that she and Benjeck hide there. Using false identification papers they would try to live as Gentiles.

Since deportation was imminent, much had to be done quickly. First, the false papers had to be purchased. Without them, travel on the trains would be impossible. Bella also felt that they would arouse less suspicion if

they traveled dressed in new coats, and if possible, with new shoes. After much persistence, she was able to buy a bolt of brown, dark and light herringbone patterned woolen cloth from a Jewish tailor, enough to make matching coats for her and her son. She also found a Polish shoemaker, who agreed to sell her a pair of red summer shoes, and to make a pair of shoes for her son.

When the SS started securing the ghetto by building addition fences and installing reflector lights to illuminate ghetto walls, the Scheins realized time had come to make their escape. On the appointed day, they left the ghetto with the yellow Jewish star loosely sewn into their coats. Each carried a small suitcase. Once in the Polish section they ripped off the hated yellow stars. After a quick, but heart wrenching goodbye, Mr. Schein headed towards the Polish woman's house, Bella and Benjeck proceeded to the train station.

At the station, Bella joined the queue to purchase tickets. Dressed in a white and red polka-dotted summer dress, matching red suede leather shoes, stockings, and carrying the tweed coat over her arm, she was the best dressed woman in line. Her brown hair, combed upwards away from her neck and held in place by three ebony combs. She wore rouge and lipstick. With her blue eyes sparkling, and her unblemished smooth skin in a blush, from tension and excitement, she looked radiant. Only the small, worn leather suitcase in her hand suggested that this was a time of turmoil and scarcity.

Her son, whom she now called Janek, wore his new coat and matching cap. Like his father, he had blond hair and gray-blue eyes. With his curly hair cut very short, he looked Gentile and unlike most Jewish children, spoke only Polish. Bella had explained to him their plan, and she was confident that he would not give them away.

It was early evening when they boarded the train. They had passed a number of checkpoints with Mrs. Schein holding identification papers in hand in order to discourage Polish and German guards from stopping her just to ask for them. No one had challenged her. Seated on the train, she gave silent thanks to God for their escape.

After a while, Janek refused to stay seated. Bella watched anxiously as he ran back and forth in the aisle, stopping on his own, or being accosted by the passengers who wanted to have some fun by talking with him. Whatever he was saying must have been amusing, for the strangers were smiling and chuckling. When he paused nearby, she realized that he had developed a game, in which he first asked the person's name and then recited a funny riddle or poem, which incorporated that name. He then rattled off one or



two other riddles and sometimes finished up with a song. Occasionally, a passenger would ask where his mother sat, and Bella saw him pointing at her. Although she did not want all this attention focused on herself, she did not dare to stop Janek. She felt a little less anxious when the woman sitting in front of her turned around, smiled, and said, "You have a clever little boy."

About two hours into their journey, the train stopped at a small rural railway station. While passengers were getting on and off, Bella noticed Gestapo police standing on the platform. As the train prepared to leave, three of them boarded at the far end of the car she was in. She watched anxiously as the Gestapo started checking identification papers and baggage. Almost immediately, a scuffle developed between a male passenger and the Gestapo. The man was pistol whipped.

Afraid her identification papers would not withstand expert scrutiny, Bella panicked. Taking Janek by the hand, and leaving her suitcase behind in order to avoid attention, she walked a few steps to the rear exit of the coach. Standing on the platform between the cars, she said, "We have to jump off," as the train started to move.

"Mom, I'm scared. I can't."

"They will catch us. You have to," Bella insisted.

"I'm scared. It's dark."

"I will help you."

Bella grabbed Janek by his coat and pulled him to the edge of the platform. She said, as calmly as she could, "I am going to count to three." She placed one hand on the nape of his neck, the other on his behind and, at the count of three, pushed. Janek jumped. Almost instantly she lost sight of him. This frightened her. She stood there, paralyzed, as if in a dream, shocked at what she had done. Seconds passed. As the train lurched to gain more speed, Bella screamed, "Benjeck," and jumped. She hit the ground hard, and felt a pain in her right shoulder. Stunned and disoriented, she forced herself to get up. Desperate to find her son, she walked back along the track shouting over and over again in the darkness, "Benjeck, where are you? Benjeck, where are you?" There was no answer. She searched many times back and forth in the scrub and bramble on both sides of the rails, without finding him. Convinced that he had fallen under the train and had been dragged along by it, she was overcome with grief and remorse. Certain that he was dead, she started sobbing uncontrollably. Overwhelmed by guilt she shouted repeatedly in the night, "Help me, I have killed my son. Help me, I have killed my son."

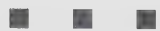
She saw lights in the distance and stumbled towards them, not aware that her stockings were torn and her knees were caked with blood. After a

while she came to a small squat farmhouse. She knocked hard on the door. When a man opened the door, Bella announced, "I am a murderer. I have killed my son. I pushed him off the train." The man took a long look at her, but did not reply. He opened the door wider and extended his hand to help her step over the high stoop. Inside, he asked Bella to sit down in a chair by the kitchen stove. She took a few steps in that direction then started to sway, but the man caught her before she fainted.

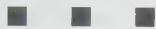
Awakening, Bella realized she was lying on a bed. Sitting in a chair next to her was the man who had let her in. He introduced himself as Mr. Kopita. A young girl handed her a glass of water. After she swallowed a few gulps, Mr. Kopita asked, "Feeling better?" Bella did not answer, she needed time to think. She handed the glass to Mr. Kopita, nodded with her head yes, closed her eyes, and started breathing deeply as if falling asleep. She heard the girl walking away and Mr. Kopita sucking on his teeth. After a while, she felt Mr. Kopita's hand groping along her leg, past her thigh, and into her underwear. She felt his rough fingers inside of her. His sucking noises had become louder. She turned on her side and freed herself from his fingers and squeezed her thighs tight. After what seemed like a very long time, Mr. Kopita removed his hand and walked away.

Bella thought, he suspects or realizes that I am Jewish. Otherwise he would not dare to behave in this perverted way. She wanted to flee, but where would she go in the middle of the night. She took off her torn stockings and folded the bottom of her dress tightly around her legs, noticing for the first time the dried blood on her knees and the scratches on the palms of her hands.

She now thought of Aaron. If Benjeck was dead, would he forgive her for what she had done? It would be very hard for him. The early years of their marriage had been contentious. He had often accused her of being too aggressive. They were still trying to work this out when the war broke out. Since then, she had taken on an even greater daily role in providing for the family. This was because during the initial phases of occupation it was less dangerous being a Jewish woman than a man. Men were constantly seized for work gangs or deportation, beaten up for the slightest infraction of unknown rules. German soldiers were less cruel to Jewish women. But, had the Gestapo caught her with forged papers, she would have been arrested, jailed, and perhaps even tortured to reveal where she had bought the documents. Now calm, she concluded, that she had no choice but to leave that train. But, why hadn't she jumped together with Benjeck, she asked herself almost out loud. She had wanted to give him a boost to be sure that he cleared the tracks. She was now convinced that



he had. But she must have pushed too hard. For that she blamed herself. Benjeck could have hit a pole or tree. She was certain that he was hurt, but not dead.



That night Father Pankowski could not sleep. He had walked for awhile in the monastery garden, when he got a nagging feeling that there was something for him to do outside. He quietly opened the gate, and walked down the road which led to the river and the railroad tracks. He followed the tracks in the direction of town, adjusting his gait so as to step from one railroad tie to the next. After a while, he recalled a dream of two nights ago. In the dream he was inside a bombed and smoldering cathedral. Endless lines of nude and emaciated men, women and children entered the cathedral through its main portals. He was certain that these people were Jewish, for every man and boy was circumcised. The exterior walls and many of the interior columns of the cathedral were standing, but the roof had burned away. To his horror he saw where once stood the altar, now swirled a whirlwind of human body parts. Heads, arms, legs, some attached to each other, most tumbling alone, all dripping blood, were carried inside this vortex, upwards into the black darkness. Father Pankowski, afraid that he would be sucked into this deafening swirl, sought safety close to the scarred cathedral walls. As he stood among the fallen stone statues of the Saints and broken crosses, he heard a voice, which said, "Save one child alone."

Now as he walked the tracks, he kept repeating this phrase. He questioned, as he had done many times before, if he had really heard these words. Convinced that he had, he asked himself again if the command meant what he thought it meant. Two weeks ago, a parishioner had asked him to take into the monastery a four-year-old Jewish boy whose parents had been killed by the Germans. Given the Monsignor's directive on this matter, he had reluctantly refused. Not that he personally disliked the Jews. While growing up in a small town, not far from the monastery, he had had contact with Jews. Although he never saw a Jew do anything wrong, he remembered the slurs and epithets that his parents and uncles had made about them; that Jews were dishonest, sneaky, and always trying to contaminate the holy water in the church. He wondered why the Jews, who in his dream entered the cathedral, had been savagely punished. He had expected a glorious baptism to take place with Jews leaving the cathedral singing hymns and holding crosses and lit candles.

As he walked around the bend that brought the railroad station into view, he saw a boy's cap lying on the tracks. He picked it up, thinking that

it had blown off the head of a passenger who traveled on the train. But as he started to walk away, he heard a whimper coming from the bushes on the right side. After a quick search he spotted Janek on the ground just as the boy was regaining consciousness. Bending over him, he noticed that the cap and boy's coat were of the same cloth. Father Pankowski surmised that the boy had fallen off the train. Using his handkerchief he wiped the boy's bloodied face. To his relief, the scratches and bruises were not deep. He asked the boy where he hurt, and Janek pointed to a big bump on his forehead. After a while, Father Pankowski asked the boy to sit up and then to stand. It seemed that the boy had survived the fall without breaking anything. He picked up Janek, and carrying him in his arms, started for the monastery. As he walked, he asked the boy a few questions. Most of the replies were "Yes" or "No." He said that his mother had been on the train with him, and that his father lived in Warsaw.

Although the monastery had a dormitory room for boys, Father Pankowski brought Janek to his room. He washed and applied an iodine tincture to his cuts. Janek said he was hungry. Father Pankowski handed Janek a tomato, which had been ripening on the windowsill.

After Janek fell asleep, Father Pankowski walked to the rectory and telephoned the stationmaster to report that he had found a boy near the tracks.



The crowing of roosters awakened Bella. She looked around and saw in the corner of the room Mr. Kapito, fully dressed, asleep and snoring in a large wooden bed. There was no sign of the young girl. Bella figured she was sleeping in the hayloft above them. She got out of bed, found her shoes and coat and tiptoed out of the house, leaving the door slightly ajar.

The sun rose above the horizon and the grass sparkled with drops of dew, wetting her feet and refreshing her. She found a small stream and washed her hands, face, and legs. She searched her coat for identification papers, but to her dismay they were gone. She was relieved to find, in one of the coat pockets, her lipstick and comb. She took her time and combed her hair and applied a little lipstick. In the distance she saw railroad tracks. Determined to find Benjeck, she followed the tracks to the railroad station.

The station was deserted. Bella knocked on the closed ticket window repeatedly. After a few minutes, a bleary-eyed man, smelling of vodka, opened the window. Bella asked if anyone had found a lost child and described Janek. As she spoke, the ticket master looked at her curiously as if making up his mind how to answer. After what seemed an eternity to



Bella, he told her that a Father Pankowski from the nearby monastery had reported finding a boy near the tracks and that the child was with him.

In the monastery, Father Pankowski asked Janek to join him in morning prayers. On his knees, in front of a cross on the wall, Father Pankowski intoned blessings and benedictions, listening for Janek to join in. He did not hear a response from Janek, only an occasional halting echo to his own Amen. Afterwards, he asked the boy a few questions on the life of the Saints, which Janek couldn't answer. He realized that Janek was Jewish. He was both surprised and annoyed by this. Janek did not fit the picture he had in mind of a dark-haired, scrawny Jewish boy with black eyes. But didn't the Savior work in mysterious ways. Surely, the voice in his dream, his urge to walk the tracks, finding this boy, all these events were not a coincidence. He resolved to shelter this boy, baptize him, and teach him to be a good Christian.

A little later, Father Pankowski was told that there was a woman at the gate who had asked for him. Facing her, Father Pankowski was shocked when the woman announced, "Father, I am here to pick up my son."

Afraid that they would attract attention, Father Pankowski led Bella to a nearby wooden bench. After they sat down, he said, "Lady, I know Janek is Jewish."

"Is he hurt?" Bella asked anxiously.

"Is he your son?"

"Of course he is my son. Is he hurt?"

"Do you have his birth certificate?"

"Not with me."

A sly smile appeared on Father Pankowski's face as he said, "He does not look like you."

"He resembles his father, but look at this coat. Isn't it of the same material as his?"

"Yes, I see."

"Please, tell me if he is hurt."

"Don't worry, he is not hurt. But it's best he stays here."

Relieved, but puzzled by the suggestion, Bella asked, "Here at the monastery?"

"Yes, but not right away. I will arrange for him to live with a local family till he learns his prayers and the history of the Saints. Then I will bring him here."

Surprised by the generous offer, Bella asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I want to save him."

"From the Germans?" Bella whispered.

"From the Germans, for the service of our Lord Jesus Christ," Father Pankowski said proudly.

"But what if he does not want to serve the church? He is a stubborn child and a fussy eater. Often he does not listen to me or his father."

Beaming, Father Pankowski answered, "In time he will learn to love our Savior, as I do."

Looking into Father Pankowski's eyes, Bella said, "I appreciate your kindness, but I know my son. He will not be happy here. Please bring him to me so that we may go on our way."

"Lady, I can't do that. I am sure that the Germans will catch you. I have to save your son."

"But there are many Jewish children that must be saved. People say that Jewish children are being gassed."

"Yes, I have heard this. But, surely, it is not true. It is an anti-German rumor."

"No, I think it is true. That is why you must help us."

"I cannot help you, but I want to help your son."

With tears welling up in her eyes, Bella said, "You don't understand. I love my son. Please let me see him."

"I will fetch him, but you must be quick. Tell him, because you love him, he has to stay here. Tell him he must listen to me."

"Please, just bring him."

Even before Father Pankowski left, Bella had decided she would not leave Benjeck with him. As she considered what to do, she took out her lipstick and slowly guided it over her lips. She also checked that her clothing was in good order.

Father Pankowski returned holding Janek by the hand. Janek was struggling to get free. When Father Pankowski released him, he jumped into Bella's open arms. Bella pressed her lips against Janek's ear and whispered, "Thank God you are not hurt. Listen, don't be afraid. Whatever happens, don't let go of my hand."

They kissed and hugged until Bella felt Father Pankowski's hand on her shoulder and he said, "Lady, we are being watched. You must sit down." He pointed his chin toward the bench.

After they were all seated, Father Pankowski looked expectantly at Mrs. Schein and moved his head in the direction of Janek signaling her to instruct him. But, Mrs. Schein did not speak. She was watching a group of priests who were approaching the bench. When they were upon them, Bella stood up and speaking in a loud voice said, "I want to thank you for



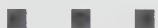
everything you have done for us." Holding Janek by the hand, she walked rapidly towards the gate. Startled, Father Pankowski followed. Near the gate he ran ahead and blocked it. "I will not let you take him," he said.

Bella looked at him and with all the courage she could gather, replied, "You will not stop me."

"I will inform the Germans," Father Pankowski said haltingly.

"No, you will not. If you do, I will tell them you harbored my son and they will arrest you."

Father Pankowski opened his mouth to reply, but then changed his mind and stepped away from the gate, letting Mrs. Schein and Janek pass. Walking down the hill, dressed in matching coats, they looked like visitors from town.



Bella and her son are walking past sun drenched fields of wheat, barley, and oats in amber hues. Polish soil certified cleansed Jews. Fuel is scarce and wheat is harvested, as it was a hundred years ago. Men swing scythes, women and youngsters gather tying stalks into bundles with rough rope. These bundles leaned against each other, in a circle, form tents. These golden tents will stand against an open sky until the sheaths are dry and then thrashed to make the kernels fly.

Mother and son want to survive to another day. Their plan is simple. From village to village on dirt roads they walk. To the farmers, in good Polish dialect they explain that Germans had forced them and other Poles, off a train. Could they stay the night and rest? For this plan to work at twilight they would have to beg. "We are hungry and tired," they would say. "The next farm is far away." This evening things do not go well. Surly and suspicious, the farmer's wife says, "Go away." Some Poles take pride in saying I can smell a Jew a mile away. Later, Bella says, "Tonight we must sleep outside. Go ahead, sit in a tent you like. I will be in one on the other side. Don't worry, dogs will not trouble us tonight. Be sure to pray the *Sh'ma*."

Dawn Karima Pettigrew

A Bed in Hell

Brother Cousin Wallace Finding

Brother Cousin Wallace jerks awake in the feather bed. His wife, Eloise, snores, a light rattle hidden in the bridge of her nose. Throughout the fifty-one years of their marriage, Eloise has learned to sleep through his fitful nights. This was not always so.

At first, when Brother Cousin Wallace would pace their ramshackle house, praying from somewhere deep in his belly, Eloise would bury her head under feather pillows and dove-in-the-window quilts. Deep sleep found her that way once, tangled and covered, and pushed a feather into her open mouth. She inhaled, nearly choked on feathery spines and cotton. Since then, she sleeps above the covers and breathes through her nostrils. Brother Cousin Wallace's night rambling seems not to trouble her at all.

Brother Cousin Wallace wanders out the back door. He paces over the sparse grass and gravel. His bare feet sense nothing under leathery soles and diabetes.

Brother Cousin Wallace is a preacher. This is like saying that red is a color, it is such a matter of local fact. He is sixteen years old, walking behind his daddy's plow, when he hears the rumble of thunder. In that thunder is a voice that sounds like river water or rain.

"Say on, Sir," answers Brother Cousin Wallace, who is nothing if not polite. He is a good boy, prone to moonshine and penny candy, but other than that, hard-working and mannerly. The voice says simply that Brother Cousin Wallace needs to tell people that God is for them and not against them. Not one to contradict, Brother Cousin Wallace nods amiably and sets out to inform The Good Lord about a certain point.

Brother Cousin Wallace cannot read. The alphabet, road signs, billboards, schoolbooks, and hymnals all cartwheel and rearrange like the stained glass slivers of a kaleidoscope. Farmwork swallowed schooling when he was twelve. The humiliation of attempting to understand sticks and circles was no great loss to Brother Cousin Wallace.

"Sir, I think you might have the wrong fellow..." Brother Cousin Wallace begins. This is the last thing he remembers. When he comes to himself, he is stretched out on the same ground he walks now, worn-out like



he's been in a struggle. Brother Cousin Wallace sits up and dusts himself off. Nothing has changed that he knows of, until he joins his mama and her sister Lucille at the settin-up for his great-uncle's wife Mamie. The preacher from the Freewill Baptist Church has been detained and the pastor from the Sovereign Grace Baptist Church has just finished his sermon on a woman named Rizpah, who sat through the turn of the seasons, guarding her dead sons.

Savannah Kale and Debbie Spencer get up and sing about heaven. Then they sing about how roses never fade. Everybody cries. Brother Cousin Wallace stuns himself by walking right up to the pulpit.

"Brethern and Sistern," Brother Cousin Wallace booms, in a voice that even he himself cannot recall hearing. He turns his head toward the Lord's Supper Table, where an oversized King James Bible stays open to the twenty-second chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. Brother Cousin Wallace should not know this. The fact that he does startles him.

Quickly, he shifts his pale eyes toward a bulletin board declaring the number of students in Sunday School, the number of chapters read, and the amount of the offering. The letters, the numbers mix and twist into an illegible jumble. Brother Cousin Wallace returns his gaze to the written-in-red passages of the Bible's thin pages. "This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of Me," reads the crimson text. Brother Cousin Wallace can read. His amazement manifests in a full-bodied shout, which all the Missionary Baptists take as a sign of Holy Ghost regeneration. Brother Cousin Wallace gets baptized and licensed in the same afternoon.

Brother Cousin Wallace reads nothing but the Bible. He announces this with great satisfaction, to anyone who will stop long enough to listen. That he can only read the King James 1611 version of the Bible serves to him and to others of his singular calling. Newspapers, The Revised Standard, and farm reports remain garbled, yet Brother Cousin Wallace reads through the minor prophets weekly. He is especially fond of Nahum, who seems to summarize the trouble with the nation, today's young people, and Hollywood in a reasonable amount of space.

While Jesus Christ Himself commands His disciples to "go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," Brother Cousin Wallace rarely has enough gasoline to get farther than the next county. For his intents and purposes, Brother Cousin Wallace decides, all the world means Cast Salt, Kentucky. This is sufficient mission field, Brother Cousin Wallace reasons, since it takes a day and an afternoon to cover on foot.

After all, these are his kin. Cousin is his given name, the reward for being related to nearly every soul in Cast Salt, Kentucky, and the

neighboring township. The thought of close kin sweltering in eternal damnation settles it. When every soul in Cast Salt is saved from the perils of Hell and other denominations, Brother Cousin Wallace will turn to other towns.

Tonight, Brother Cousin Wallace awakens suddenly. This is not unusual, except that Brother Cousin Wallace struggles to pray through. He tries, repeatedly, to seek God, to find Him in the middle of memorized Scriptures and remembered sermons.

"Say on, Sir," Brother Cousin Wallace pleads. He turns his head in Heaven's general direction. His neck creaks with the wear and tear of looking back. The moon, full and luminous, fills the night sky. Brother Cousin Wallace watches the sky through irises glazed with the first blues of cata-racts.

The stars are going out.

Brother Cousin Wallace gasps. He throws his hands upward. Gnarled fingers grasp at the constellations, as if to keep them lit a while longer.

"Lord, save us!" Brother Cousin Wallace hollers long and loud before realizing he has not made a sound.

The keys are in Brother Cousin Wallace's maroon truck. It is not his, not really, only three-quarters his, just fourteen more payments shy of title deed. A year and two months, or a year all by itself if he has a good Christmas, and Brother Cousin Wallace will own this truck. Free and Clear. There is a sermon in that, Brother Cousin Wallace thinks. For Brother Cousin Wallace, life itself is the best tract.

Cast Salt's farms yield to open spaces and hills. Brother Cousin Wallace crosses the Tennessee state line somewhere between the last line of Hosea and the first sentence of Joel. He chants the prophets from memory, until he reaches Zechariah, the eighth chapter, the twenty-third verse.

"We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you."

Brother Cousin Wallace skids into a stop by the roadside. Just right of the breakdown lane, a pile of skirts and blouses fills a spot beside the highway. His brow furrows, as he overturns the garments. Brother Cousin Wallace inhales sharply. Under the outfits, a woman lies still. Cradled in her arms, a baby is blinking at him.

"Lord, have mercy," Brother Cousin Wallace moans. "Who are you, Little Bit? Are you why the sky's falling?"

The baby blinks again. Brother Cousin Wallace stoops, his left knee popping like corn in sizzling oil. He reaches for the baby, trying to pry her from the woman's arms. Brother Cousin Wallace touches the tanned flesh, which is cool underneath his callused palm.

Brother Cousin Wallace considers going for help. He could get the highway patrol, who would investigate the situation. Only they might put the baby in foster care, where there would be no guarantee of Baptist upbringing. Brother Cousin Wallace is not sure about transporting found infants over state lines, and Eloise is not all the way up to walking the floors at night, what with her having asthma and all. He is weighing the issues and waiting for God to answer, when the baby's eyes begin to close.

"Come back," he shouts, "in the Name of Jesus Christ, come back!"

The woman opens her eyes first. They are round and shadowed with dark lashes. The baby yawns. Brother Cousin Wallace steps backward. God has knocked the wind out of him.

"Much obliged, Lord," he whispers. He bends over and lifts the pair into the cab of his truck. His strength surprises him. Brother Cousin Wallace drapes his own flannel shirt around the woman and her baby. He climbs in beside them and u-turns back toward Kentucky.

Brother Cousin Wallace glances at his passengers. The woman sleeps deeply. So does the baby. Brother Cousin Wallace gazes at the sky. For the first time in hours, it looks just fine.

Kenneth Pobo

Poem for an Office Wall

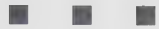
No, I have no metaphors for fucking your ass.
It's not like anything. But, I'm trying to be a poet,
so:

fucking your ass,
Venice,
springtime.

fucking your ass,
my cock says
"Home at last!"

fucking your ass
hollyhock, storm,
wet buds,

open. None says what it's like, not even close.
A poem, a kid riding a bike so fast
she's a blur, a breeze—turn around, she's
gone.



Patricia Profit

Part 1

Part 2

Part 1

We were running water in a
neglected sink
in our unexisting home
where you cared for the
children I never wanted

you shared your visions of
babies aborting their mothers
as I cut us out another line
and we talked only of escaping
California
New York
have you been to San Fransico?

and I needed to feel you
I needed your insecurities
your voice
your hands
eyes and fingernails
I needed your protection
but you were strapped to a bed
locked in a cage
hospital #4

Part 2

He tells me I look slutty
but it's alright
says I'm naturally that way
and I laugh
nervously
slowly
we sip our gas station coffee
in a strangers apartment
in silence
in seclusion

Shit
I wish he'd just
leave me or fuck me or
marry me
Then my concentration is stolen
by the stranger
as he cuts me another line

I inhale
and it no longer remains important

His hand fell on my thigh
my eyes closed
and I discovered
I'm Jesus and he's not
I'm real and he's afraid
of that
and I ask
did you write about me today
the way a stranger would

Octavio Quintanilla

My First Time with Frances

She works at a peluqueria cutting and trimming hair,
her breasts collapsing like big, soft geese on the tip of your shoulders
as the scissors open and close like dangerous fingers,

foaming with anticipation at the meat of curls.

All the young men from near by barrios get serviced
for five bucks; the horny kids fall in love with her breasts,
the thirty-year old orphans suck on the peach of her touch,

nibble on the movement of her warm hands.

She hardly talks to the boys but often notices their soft erections
as they articulate their wet dreams through their hard-breathing,
and she only smiles, and often dreams of a home, and often tries

to picture her brown eyes trickling with someone's love,

but she is alone in the dark little mortuary she calls life,
in the laughter of the young pachucos who whisper her name
when she knows all they want are her hands.

She is alone when she repeats overheard conversations,

when her hands shift like centuries and she knows
and everyone knows that she is only thirty-five,
alone when girls ask where she bought her perfume,

alone, she thinks, sola, like a poison never used.

But the young men do not know her secret;
they only recognize the pelt of her hands, the graceful
triumph of scissors over hair, the dark cape covering

the stiffness between their legs; they only feel

the formality of her breasts rubbing on the stretch of their shoulders,
picturing the nipples bursting with caramel; the orphans close their eyes
and remember their mother delousing their heads

and squeezing the lice between their fingernails.

Barbara Jane Reyes

Wedding Sonnet

After England Hidalgo's "Dog Talk," Acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 48" x 72" (2002)

If you can afford a Filipina,
Then please follow me to the smoking room.
Light up a Cohiba, flip these pages;
Let's see which one catches your eye. This one?
Humble, young, educated. Virgin too.
Don't purchase one that has been to Japan;
Chances are, she's been laid by Yakuza.
But these province girls know how to treat you,
Clean your house, cook your breakfast, suck you off,
Then go to work, send their money back home.
Hide their green card somewhere they can't find it,
Justice of Peace will marry you cheap.
But you must call now and order on line.
American Express? Visa's just fine.

Wedding Sonnet 2

For my American Benefactor:
I, your pretty little Filipina girl,
Do solemnly swear, to spit in your face
Whenever your dirty mouth spews promise
Of a better life in your damn country.
I will not obey you and honor you,
Nor will I dedicate my life to you.
I will not thank God for you. Why should I?
Here's my vow: So long as we both shall live,
I will not please you, nor tend to your needs,
I will not love you, nor bend to your will,
I will not want you, and if you come close,
I will bite your tongue, clear out of your skull.
I will stab you in the back, with a smile.

Alicita Rodriguez

The House of Monkèys

1.

Secreted behind a coral rock wall, the house of monkeys howled and hooted and giggled with the calls of its inhabitants. Made entirely of coral rock, the main house was supported by grandiose wooden buttresses, each carved in bas-relief with scenes of grotesqueries and debaucheries—a voluptuous Kali eating her offspring, umbilical cord still attached; a bearded Islamic man thrusting his engorged penis in the ass of an almond-eyed girl; a curly-locked Greek chasing after three young boys, their faces contorted in fear. I could see only the carvings framing the front door, lit by red floodlights staked deep in the wet soil of the incandescent peacock ferns.

2.

Santiago took me there. Lola, his mother, was dating the owner of the house, Deering; they had met at one of her shows. Lola was a die-hard socialist of the artsy variety, a combination lounge singer and performance poetess, who loved to tell the story of blowing Che Guevara. Poor in her own brand of collectivism, she raised Santiago in a houseboat on the dirty river that intersected the city, anchored at the docks of a wealthy engineer who had worn the red beret in his youth. She favored the company of the nouveau riche comrades. Her red lips spouted the horrors of capitalism and stained the Baccarat glasses of Deering's estate; they sang the rebel songs of the revolution and kissed the mouth and sucked the cock that provided her freedom. For all her eccentricities, I liked Lola. She adored Santiago and me; she adored us. I wondered sometimes if she would have loved us had we been anything but beautiful.

3.

When Deering opened the door—a massive wooden swing with a central doorknob cast in the shape of a pitcher plant—I was shocked by his figure. A portly man in khakis and a polo, his bald head shining even in the dim light of the unevenly hung brass electroliers. Deering gave us the customary kisses on the cheek and invited us in with formal grace, as if his house were sodden in normalcy. Lola hugged me so tightly that I felt sick to my stomach. She let me go, attacking Santiago. Baby, you're skin and

bones. You should stay a few weeks so I can fatten you up. I watched her as she examined Santiago; the straps of her orange and fuchsia silk dress kept slipping off. I could see the fleshy slope of her breasts and the outline of her areolas; they were small and pinched and dark in that Latin way. Her hips pushed at the seams of the dress and her high ass lifted the back of the hem. She might have caught me staring, because she winked at me and told me I looked fabulous as always. I replied that I really needed to use a bathroom. With that, Deering put his hand on my spine, at the curve of my waist, and led me through the red foyer down a black marbled hallway hung with all manner of erotic art. There was no sense or order to the gilded frames. The paintings hung claustrophobically, above and below each other from the height of the ceiling to the crowned molding of the floor. From the subtlety of Moureau's *Galatea* to the horror of Beardsley's *I Have Kissed Thy Mouth*, to the romance of Mucha's *Job* and the violence of Rop's *The Abduction*. Penetrations and whippings, tongues and vaginas, occidental and eastern—the images followed me as I walked slowly, carefully down the corridor. I hoped it wasn't much farther. Nausea was overtaking me. I found it difficult to balance on my thin heels. I wanted to lean on the wall and slip off my shoes, but could find no place to rest my hand. I stopped for a moment to breathe deeply and still my vision, to swallow back the bile. Deering clutched my elbow and asked how I was feeling. I haven't been well, I told him. These shoes, I continued. Somewhere in my mind, although not pressing, was the concern that I might be appearing strange to this person whom I had never met. Just breathe, he told me. Still holding my elbow, he asked me to lift my foot. I raised it just a hair from the floor and he removed my shoe. When I stepped onto my bare foot, the imbalance in my height swayed me and I felt the desire to throw up. Somehow he removed the other shoe and ushered me into the bathroom. I closed the door, locking it, and barely had time to grab hold of my hair before vomiting into the golden bowl.

4.

In my hurry, I must not have locked the door properly because I felt Santiago towering above me as I rested my cheek on the toilet seat. His big hands with their almost feminine piano fingers caressed my hair and smoothed my head, petting me. The slight pressure of his touch soothed me. He kneeled down behind me and ran his fingers along my back, tracing my spine. I breathed into his stroke, aware of him moving from one bone to the next, like running a thumb along the bristles of a brush. Feel better, he asked me. Yes, I sighed, not moving. He got up and fumbled in

my purse. I heard him removing my things and laying them on the dresser. Can you move? He placed his hands at either side of my waist. He lifted me and placed me in front of the mirror. I grabbed the toothbrush he offered me and brushed my teeth. Not too bad now, he whispered, combing my hair with his hands. Pretty good, I answered, my head angling back with each pull. My neck exposed in the mirror, I stared at its slope, moved by the picture of his attention. The mirror, the art nouveau curves of the dresser, Santiago's hand on my shoulder, the monkeys screaming in the night, softened by the violin playing of the crickets: I was outside of myself, looking in at us, caught in a web of our history, his love for me, his mother's strange affections, Deering's house. What a beautiful world, I thought. He powdered my face and put lipstick on me; his hands were steady. I pressed myself up against him, got on my tiptoes to kiss him. He lifted me onto the sink. I leaned my head against the mirror. I felt his mouth on my vagina, his lips warm, his tongue moving softly in circles. I was slow in my breathing, hardly able to bend down enough to run my fingers through his curls. He was slow, keeping his head still, knowing this would go nowhere for both of us. It was enough just to feel skin and hands, the ridges of his fingertips and the muscle of his tongue, the swelling of my lips and the flexing of my calves. Just let me see it, I whispered. He stood up, unzipped his pants, put his soft dick on my thigh. Even like that, it was long and thick and veined, sleek and warm in my hand.

5.

When we had first arrived, Santiago had turned off the headlights early on in the winding driveway leading up to Deering's house. He switched on the overhead light, took out the black leather shaving bag with the needles and the cotton and powder. I can't shoot it, I explained. I won't be able to stand. I've never even met your mom's boyfriend. My complaints were unnecessary. He had already cut some powder for me and laid it in lines on a CD, handing me a small red straw, like the ones used for stirring coffee. But he had gotten used to it. I think, by this point, that he was using every day. He needed the surge, the hot rush of the needle breaking the flesh, the swirl of his blood mixing in the syringe, watching the red snake up and out of him, then make its way back inside with the last push.

6.

It hadn't always been like this. Before Santiago's illness, we fucked all the time. We barely did drugs, only on special occasions. Now, our weekends were a lullaby of heroin. On some level, Santiago must have thought

that if he couldn't reach death, I shouldn't be able to either. Nobody could climax in that state. That's simplistic, of course. Just his inability threw new light on our marriage, on his life. Depression had much to do with it, and the hedonistic desire to forget. During the week, we obsessed with work. Santiago painted feverishly, some desperation plunging his hands into the oils, driving him to mix, to squeeze all the tubes, to have it all lain before him like unlimited possibility. I built the firm's models, cutting and constructing, breaking pencil points as I shrunk the numbers to scale. My new work was meticulous. I carved every miniature pediment, hinged every tiny door, landscaped with bonsai. But from Friday to Sunday, the stillness killed us. The absence was overpowering. We tried playing tennis, redecorating the living room, doing crossword puzzles. Nothing worked until fate played its hand. I ran into an ex-boyfriend of mine from high school, a small time dealer. I snuck out of work one Monday to visit him. Just as he was showing me his meditation room, just as I was rolling my eyes at his feigned spirituality and his copy of *Be Here Now*, he leaned up against me and I felt his hard on. In that moment, I forgot that he believed in a global community, that he didn't use deodorant, that he stank of patchouli. It relieved me to know that I could still give a man an erection, but I wanted desperately for that man to be my husband, to be Santiago. I bought some heroin before I left, sore and sadder than I had begun the day, so I might have started the whole sordid pattern. I thought it might relax him enough to make love to me in other ways, to concentrate on what we could do together, as opposed to what we could not. Therapy hadn't helped. We went to a group once, but we were the youngest couple there. Diabetes and strokes, wrinkles and polyester pants: these things only slapped us in the face, reminding us of our particular brand of injustice. We were too young for this; these people had had a lifetime of fucking.

7.

Outside, there was an almost imperceptible netting above the monkeys. Deering led us to the back porch, where we sat on leopard-print settees. I leaned back against Santiago, my head on his chest. Deering and Lola sat side by side. She tried to grab his hand or kiss him every once and a while, and, while he succumbed, he needed a certain amount of personal space to tell his monkey stories. If a favorite of his came into view, he'd jump onto his moccasined feet and point, kissing and waving at the monkey to approach. When he described the different characteristics of the species, he used his fingers to make faces, pulling his ears out or flattening his nose, or stretching his eyelids back to reveal enlarged eyeballs. He owned White-fronted

Capuchins, with their human-like eyes and their rounded mouths; the monkeys usually found wearing silly fez hats and collecting coins. He had only one Black Marmoset, a furry ball that looked like a baby gorilla, and Deering worried that it would lose its identity. It was lonely; that was obvious. The Marmoset, Mackandal, leaped onto Deering's shoulders the moment he walked outside, resting its hands on his bald head. He had a few Pygmy Loris, tiny things with heads so flat and wide, they looked two-dimensional. The Aye-ayes looked like large-eared possums. But his collection of Lemurs was his favorite. One of his Ring-tailed Lemurs had just given birth and Deering had the baby inside the house in diapers. Mariposa was Lola's plaything. She bathed it and dressed it and fed it and slept with it; she did all the motherly things with that monkey that she had neglected with Santiago. Lola stroked Mariposa's head; are you sure you're fine? I wasn't sure if she was talking to the monkey or Santiago, but it was Santiago that responded. Never been better. Lola sighed, I know that smile and I know when you're lying. For a moment, I hoped that she would push the issue, but she smirked and returned her attention to the monkey. While I watched Lola cooing Mariposa, the monkey clung to her, thrusting itself against her leg. It's learning naughty things. Maybe it was peeping on you and Santiago in the bathroom, she said, winking at me. It would be sucking your pussy if that were the case, Santiago said to his mother. Lola laughed; she was the kind of woman who enjoyed saying words like pussy and cock and vagina when they were not necessary or warranted. Deering leaned towards Lola and kissed her, Mackandal retreating further down his back. I excused myself, staring at Santiago. The mosquitoes are making me itchy, I claimed, scratching my arms and legs. I was coming down and I was getting sleepy. If I stayed awake much longer, I would start to get depressed, the weight of Santiago's illness would bear down on me, and I would need another fix. I went inside and sat in the cool of the air-conditioned living room. It was done up in Arabian-style, pillows everywhere surrounding a mosaic fountain. The walk inside made me tired and I was nodding in and out of consciousness on the velvet cushions. Somewhere, I heard the voice of Lola whispering, and Santiago, and then the deep lull of Deering's southern accent.

9.

I woke up in the middle of the night, confused and misplaced. I looked around, saw myself in black satin pajamas I did not recognize, saw Santiago naked, asleep at my side, saw a needle on the nightstand beside the bed that was not ours. The embroidered initials on the pillow and the

howling of the monkeys made me realize we were still at Deering's place. I kissed Santiago on the neck, ran my fingers through his curly hair, climbed on top of him and hugged him hard. He did not wake up. His breathing was slow and shallow, almost imperceptible. I pulled the covers away from his body and slid down the bed, putting my ear to his chest. Then I stared at him for a long while, running my fingers along his penis, smelling his armpits and his pubic hair, rested my face on his muscular thigh. I cried for some time, wetting Santiago with my tears.

10.

I could not bear being uncertain of where I was. Santiago's presence gave me some relief, but I had always had this need to know where I was. When we went on vacation, it was always me who read the maps, who learned the subway systems, who directed us. I got up quickly and left the room, walking quietly with bare feet, mapping the house in my head, creating a floor plan, envisioning a model. It would be hard to create; there were so many details, so many complexities. In the kitchen, stainless steel and antique red appliances, I was drinking a soda and sketching the floor plan. Like a ghost, I had wandered the entire house unnoticed. Even the monkeys seemed quieted. I lit a cigarette from the gas stove.

11.

When I turned to return to my sketch, Lola was standing there, holding the page I had torn out of one of Deering's art books, examining my work. Something's wrong, she told me, although it sounded more like a question. What? I asked, inhaling deeply. I thought she was talking about my sketch, but she dropped the paper on the table. It drifted onto the floor, swinging back and forth. Did I miss something? I asked. Lola sat down, her robe falling open along her legs. No, it's beautiful. I'm not talking about that. I had never seen Lola look so serious. What do you mean? I turned to tap my ash into the sink and my vision became blurry. It had been a long time, more than six months, since Santiago and I had been to the hospital, that I'd been able to cry like that. I couldn't breathe. I held my head in my hands, dropped the cigarette into the sink. I wiped my nose on the sleeve of the pajamas. The sink accepted everything I let fall into it, muffling and distorting my pleas. Lola leaned against me, holding me, smothering me with her body. She reached to turn on the cold water, ran it along my face. She turned me around towards her and wiped me dry with a kitchen towel. I fell into her, dead weight, and we slid to the floor. My face was nestled into her neck. I breathed her in and out, smelling her skin; it was like Santiago's.

I threw a leg over her and held her, clutching and digging my fingers into her. I sought her mouth, kissed her. She pushed me away, asked me what was wrong. I need you, I told her, pulling her close to me, cupping her breast in my hand. I slid down and put my mouth on her, imagining I was Santiago, picturing him with his mouth on me just as he had done earlier this evening. She tried to push me away but I pinned her down. Just as she started quivering beneath me, I slid up to put my tongue in her mouth. She kissed me, cupping my face in her hands, wiping my tears. I took her hand and moved it towards me. I knew I was wet. She fingered me, penetrating me slowly, hooking her fingers inside me. I arched my back and moved myself onto her fingers, making her slide further inside me. I felt myself shaking and then I felt release. I stood up quickly and pulled up my pajama bottoms. There's nothing I can say, I said, panting.

12.

I ran upstairs to the bedroom where Santiago slept. I crawled into bed and put my chest against his back. I held him tightly, assuming I was hurting him. But he could feel nothing. I resisted touching his neck, already knowing that there would be no pulse. Outside, the sun was rising a blinding orange and the Lemurs jumped from tree to tree. The Howler Monkeys screamed at the dawn, demanding a new day.



Juan Armandos Rojas-Joo

The Beat

The Echo

Translated from the Spanish by Jennifer Rathbun and the author.

I am the city in the middle of the desert

A mime and poet
from a city that lives in the middle of the desert

I am the one that dreams these stories
of a mime and a poet
from a city that sleeps in the center of the desert

Fictitious border
of a mime and a poet
that plays with dreams
of a city in the middle of the desert

Voice of silence
border
mime poet
stage of dreams where a city watches memory exile

I am the journey
weaving lives
of mimes and poets
that in their playful seriousness
dream these stories
of a city in the middle of a desert

Emma Rosenthal

The Tenacity of Love *A revolutionary love letter*

*Al riesco de parecer ridículo el revolucionario está
animado por gran sentimientos de amor.*

—Che Guevara

Dear William,

This is a love letter, though not the type of love letter a man would be afraid to receive after what between us was in most likelihood a one night stand. While nothing I do is shallow, some relationships aren't meant to last longer than one night. I am not a clinging vine, although I used to be, afraid, more afraid to be alone than poorly matched. Today I know my own feet and my own soul and I no longer have to sew myself into the hem of my garment as I walk on broken glass. This is a revolutionary love letter, not a romantic one, not one meant to bind or lure, one meant to free, to liberate, to heal. A friend of mine called me last night, late, past the calling hours, while INS was rounding up, arresting, detaining, cuffing, fingerprinting, holding without explanation people from his country. Another round of raids, and roundups and deportations, that started before my grandmother stepped on Ellis Island, and continue to this day. All our families know this terror, if not in this generation, in ones that came before us.

He and I have known each other for many years and we love each other, not romantically, not sexually, it is a different intimacy, the intimacy that comes when there is held between two friends the faith in the endurance and the integrity of the other, an understanding, an esteem for the history of the other and the work each is called to do.

I had called him that day, twice, his cell phone had been off, unusual, that I couldn't reach him and I had left him two messages. It had been a simple question, it was a five-minute call at best. I needed to know if the sound system we had used in the park a few weeks ago could feed two mikes.

"Why are you calling me?" He was enraged.

These are hard times and I am seeing so many of us, those of us with vision, who feel what is happening around us, I see us, we are going mad.

I went mad a few weeks ago and he had carried me through it, held the burden of my perception of the moment, the distortion of the situation, the delusion, the isolation my mind had latched itself to. Lately I have been praying (even revolutionaries pray) that when gripped by the fear and insanity, when grasped in the separation, when bitterness is hurled at my feet or thrown in my face, to be able to hold my people through, to carry their burden, staying, not running away from the anger.

My people; I am Jewish, yes, and they are my people and very, very mad. Genocide will make you so, but when I say my people I do not stop at blood and kinship. This friend, he is my people. All those who fight for justice, they are my people. In this sense you, too, are my people.

His anger scared me. "Why are you calling me?" he demanded. He had never asked me this before.

"Because I am your friend." I answered as if asking a question.

"What do you want? Why did you call?" He yelled at me. I wanted to yell back or run away. I stayed. It took more strength to stay than to strike back or leave.

"It's not important now. What's going on?" I asked.

"You of all people should know what I am going through. I shouldn't have to tell you." As if in the not knowing I had betrayed him.

Was it a personal matter he had mentioned to me last week in passing? A situation that I had thought had greater significance in his life than the attention and intensity he was bringing to the telling.

"No it is not that," he barked. "You do not understand, perhaps it is because we live in different worlds."

Later in the conversation he would tell me that that was not what he said at all. He reminded me that all our conversations were probably taped and that perhaps we would have the opportunity to play it back one day. At that point I understood that we had passed through the trial of this conversation, survived the test and the battlefield, this insidious war that turns us on each other.

From the moment I met him we had been held in a deep kinship. Through all the years of friendship, this was the first time I had seen it, felt it, was imbedded in it; the wall, impenetrable. We live in different worlds. We are separate. The war was so imbedded in him that he was mad at me for loving him.

How could I know what was upsetting him? Not because of different worlds, but because he had never brought his pain to me before and because there was so much that could be the cause of his distress. I began to

guess and was progressively wrong each time, right, then wrong. His anger and his fear knew no harbor.

Finally, I reminded him: "Don't embrace the separation, I am your friend whatever you are carrying, tell me, I can carry it with you. Describe this world to me. I will enter it with you. It is what I do, why I am here on this earth."

In the years I have known him, he has shared with me the loss of the revolution, the execution of his sister, his own imprisonment, the harbinger of defeat in the silence of the radio. All with calm self-possession. I left room but never forced the matter. I know trauma, too well. I know sometimes we can make statements so horrible with such dispassion because we have not touched the pain and it isn't time. Other times, with such dispassion because we already know, we have fallen as far as the pain will take us and we have moved on. My trauma is of no consequence. I choose to love anyway, choose to fight, choose to seek out connection despite my wounds. I have let them heal. Perhaps his wounds had healed, or perhaps they had not and when the pain surged, it always surges, I would listen then.

This was the first time he had brought his pain to me and it was coming in a torrent of anger that needed to be held, not fought.

He and I are the most dangerous of revolutionaries, because we don't throw bombs, because we love, across boundaries, across separation. "When can we talk?" he asked me. "I cannot have this conversation over the phone."

"I can jump in a car right now if you need me to," I said. It was the middle of the night with more than fifty miles between us.

"No, it's not like that. It can wait," he told me.

Friday I will know what world it is he says I do not live in. I have entered worlds like this before, stepped into lives and troubles I could have lived a lifetime and never known, suddenly connected to experiences and suffering more profound than marriage, more inextricable than divorce. This is what happens when we choose to love, the tenacity of love, when freedom is measured in humanity and the air we breathe instead of presidential platitudes. The worlds are joined anyway. Separation is illusion. Did so many Palestinians ever foresee their lives so intricately connected to the death camps of Europe? Suppose our grandparents, the world, collectively had refused the genocide of the Armenians, had entered that world, married that suffering, connected to that experience, stood up to generals and executioners. Such a stand perhaps would have changed the entire trajectory of history. The world we live in today would be very different from the experience of pain we all find ourselves in now.



William, last Friday night your anger scared me too. I am learning to tell myself words alone cannot hurt me and to endure, share the burdens we all carry living on this earth, especially those of us who know that freedom isn't the right to go to the shopping mall. Justice doesn't fly a flag from an SUV.

There I was, in your home, presenting possibilities, a crush now a reality. I don't like pedestals, I tend to fall off and find no one there to catch me and there I was, and there you were pushing me off the pedestal you had propped me up on. I think you chose to insult me because you were afraid. I think I knew this at the time and so chose not to take your racist admonitions personally. "Why do we always need a Jewish savior?" you screamed at me, after repeatedly insulting the nose of the labor leader in the movie, and pointing to every rich, oppressive person and calling them a Jew. These were mean words, they were meant to hurt and they did. I shut you up by putting my tongue in your mouth. You were sweet again, on my tongue, your essence next to my skin, the scratchiness of your beard, the power of grip and grasp, the mingling of our dualities.

So why the need for a Jewish savior? Forget Jewish, forget that an entire civilization has been built on the image of a dead Jew on a stick, worn on gold chains around the necks of believers. Forget that all of Christendom has killed my people in the name of a Jewish savior. I do not know why you need a Jewish savior. I do not know why a Jewish savior captures the minds so vividly of those who would harm us so profoundly. You worship Jesus, not I. But that is not what you meant. It was just a clever way I could divert the conversation, could redirect your attack, deflect the blow, illuminate the bigotry that you were sending my way when all I was offering you was my warmth and the possibilities that can come when a man and a woman are drawn to each other, possibilities of connection, collaboration, transformation, the way that passion and vision intertwine, the nakedness of risk, the promise of endurance.

Jewish or not, we all need saviors. Very few books on Jewish history on your shelves, two or three, far fewer than the books of your people on my shelves. I know your history much more intimately than you know mine. I am proud of Jewish labor leaders. I am proud of where my people have stood on the battlefield of human rights. I am proud of the risks we take and the love we make, daily with the world, passionately seeking deeper love and deeper justice.

Yes we make mistakes, bumble over patronizing conversation, err in cultural assumptions and misunderstandings, but we are there, risking the possibilities, allowing for the connections, breaking down the separations. Cross-cultural dialogue can be very difficult. And yet you condemned us for even being there, in the streets, in the factories, in the fields. "Why was

Fred Ross Jewish? Why was Saul Alinsky Jewish?" You accused me as if we had injured you by desire alone. And yet you had invited me to dinner, had cooked for me, lit candles, chosen music. And in that evening, you could not even sit with me without insulting me, your guest, so difficult is this cross-cultural divide, so hard to cross.

And why didn't I leave? Most women would have left with righteous dramatics, stormed out, broken something. I thought of leaving as I sat with you on your sofa, stunned by your anger and accusations but I felt in my soul that it wasn't time to leave. There was the anticipation built up over the preceding weeks of telephone and email flirtations and innuendos, the mysteries built up in workplace exchanges that called within me for exploration, resolution. It was the man I first saw, the one who is so tender with children, the one who knows how to love the world, the adored teacher, the man who was drawn to me, not the one who offended me in his kitchen, but the man who invited me there. That was the man I wanted to kiss.

Beyond that, I have spent my life held in the rigid duality of right and wrong. I am dancing with the possibilities of dialectics, human dialectics, the changes we bring about in one another. I lived an angry life for many years. I know what it means to strike before struck, to hurt someone before I am hurt. I think that is what you were doing. Offending me to push me away. You said you were teasing. Perhaps, but these were jokes that require trust that hadn't been earned without risking admonition.

I didn't want to reproach your anger with anger. I wanted to leave on good terms, silly perhaps under the circumstances, and stranger yet with what manifested itself as good terms. Was I sleeping with the enemy when I joined myself with you? I don't think so. I was dancing with the possibilities, with desire, with complexity; the understanding that each of us is more than we pretend to be. Beyond that, I was meeting you with abandon in a life of caution, fear and righteousness.

Venturing beyond your own people is not a skill you have honed, overwhelmed as you were by the prospects of one dinner with a woman from a different people. So be easy on us. There is no need to be cruel. No need to push me away. I understand you are wounded. I do not come pouring salt.

You want to go to Chiapas, you, an American, Chicano. You will be like a White boy there, stumbling over your desire to help, mixed with your assumptions, the barriers of language. Spanish in El Monte and Spanish in Chiapas are not the same, and then there are the languages of the region. You speak the language of the conqueror. None of this is simple.

Savior, why do any of us need a savior? On your bookshelf one of two books on my people, sat the book *Schindler's List*. Schindler, our savior, an

Austrian, womanizing, capitalist, Christian member of the Nazi Party, a slave holder, a manufacturer of war commodities and weapons. His Jews still call themselves to this day Schindler Jews. Do you remember how he saved them? He bought them. He owned them. Our savior, a slave holder, our savior, our master. I come from a people whose hair was made into rugs, our skin into lampshades and ladies purses, our ashes into the soap our murderers cleansed themselves with daily.

We all need saviors. We need saviors because we cannot endure without them, because we are not alone, we are not separate, we bleed the same, we love our children, our streets, the keys that fit into the doors of the places we call home. I do not need to be in your skin to know the pain that comes with negation, the fear that comes with marginalization. Gripped in that grip of humanity, we are inextricably joined together. When we think we are alone, that our humanity is more humane, that our suffering is greater, that our experience is incomprehensible, that we are too worthy for the support that salvation of someone else brings, then we too become dangerous.

We build monuments to our suffering and isolation. We construct walls of separation. We bring suffering upon our own image, our own community, our own blood. We do not recognize the reflection in the mirror. We find narrow solutions of self-preservation that are not preservation.

Not all Jews are labor leaders and revolutionaries. We do not all see and seek universal possibilities. Right now, so many of my people, the Jews, from ashes and lampshades, from roundups and numbers tattooed on arms, fight a war of isolation, forgetting our own skin, thinking we must be separate, forging unholy alliances with previous perpetrators in order to extract land and labor we are not entitled to, from those who never meant us harm. We are more alone than ever, more endangered than ever.

Do you want this for your people? Do you have to do it alone? Is this the road to freedom or the ghetto of the mind, the separation, the isolation posing for liberation? Justice requires unity, connection, revelry in diversity, a celebration of possibilities, the risk of connection, the adventure of love, real love, not pasty romantic love of shallow movies, not a president kissing his wife love, not the love the capitalist has for his money; propaganda; greed, not love.

Liberation requires the humility of both the savior and the saved. Truly we save each other, heal each other. These may very well be the worst of times. It is the strength we have to hold each other up that may very well be all that can get us through. We defend ourselves the most when we fight for someone else, knowing in the connection, that the possibility of a more just world is truly the only battle worthy of the fray.

—Emma

Steve Russell

Indistinguishable Color

A truckstop on the west side of Albuquerque.
Late in the day and short more than a dollar,
I pull myself aboard a muddy Kenworth
of indistinguishable color.

The desert turns to desert,
eighteen big ones hum on I-40
as the Western sky
explores the colors
of Provider's palette.

In the mirror
Albuquerque is a scatter of glittering ore
salted around the Sandias,
spilling toward the darkening desert.

Beauty behind me.
Beauty before me.

The country music station is lost with the daylight.
Scanning the airwaves, the radio bumps against a Dine'
voice.

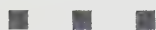
My benefactor punches in the station
long enough to make his point:

"Listen to that heathen shit!"

(Has he heard the Code Talkers?)

I stare ahead where the sun has sucked all penumbral light
below the horizon leaving the desert
of indistinguishable color.

"I guess they gave this Godforsaken desert to the
Navajos because there's nothing out here they could screw
up."



(We are not in Dinétah, but the wild beauty of this
land teases at the edge of the headlights' glow.)

Jaw aching, I ask to be let off in Gallup near the string
of bars and pawnshops cast along the highway to net the
Indian trade.

"I thought you were going to Phoenix. Well, be
careful of the drunk Indians along here. Nothin' more
dangerous than a drunk Indian."

I catch my duffel, wave goodbye, and wander among the
fullbloods on the street of Gallup, just another passing
pilgrim

of indistinguishable color.

Ankush Sachdeva

servant

I smell the flavors of your neck
in this creel of codfish.

You thumbed the fish
till its bones crumbled,
piece by piece,
gills garnished your wrists
like ousted confetti.

Supper revolved around
the pungence of Madras Curry.

Somewhere, in the handcrushed
garlic or Origello spice,
I can taste everything
that you touched today.



Ruth Irupé Sanabria

The Adventures of Ghetto Girl: At The D.C. Multiplex

ghetto girl
not your average super heroine
flyin' higher
than most
wonder women

I arrive unannounced
creepin' stealthily
through the boroughs
catchin' every criminal slip
of your tongue
trappin' and slappin'
your ignorance
with my brown
cape

this is no super joke
I have my super crew
and we're coming
to a theater near you
to rescue
all the spics and niggas
stuck in naked freeze frames
big butt monkey sex scenes
illiterate dope dealin' rice and beans
stereotypes
in stereo sound

hold tight
Rositas, Marias
Jose and Carlitos
Shaquishas, Rasheedas
Big Buck and Sweet Daddy Oooo's
no longer will you have to
likes it like dis or loves it like dat baby

yeah

I'm ghetto girl
and
I'm coming
to a theater near you

Sarange

"PRIMAL PLEASURES"

A Lover's Fantasy

They were worn and tired from the stress and strains of daily living in the city. They promised each other they would take the time to know one another once again. After all, the world had kept them apart for so very long, and now they yearned to be in each other's arms...alone and in love.

They travel together to a tropical place far, far away. It is nearly deserted and very primitive. They settle in to a small straw bungalow perched high in the air on wooden stilts. The view from the open-air terrace is spectacular. To the west is a valley filled with wild flowers of amazing color and form. The aroma drifts past their domain filling the air with a sultry sweetness. To the east they see a wall of green covered mountains glowing with hues of red and purple and yellow from the brilliant sunlight glistening against the indigenous vegetation of this small island paradise.

The two think it nice to take a long walk through the forest following a path that lay straight ahead from their front door. The air is warm and balmy. The temperature 84 degrees so they need little clothing. He wears a T-shirt and shorts while she only a sundress.

They walk together, hand in hand, taking in all the breathtaking scenery that surround them. Deeper and deeper they go into the forest, not realizing how far they've gone for they are so happy to just be with one another, alone at last. Soon they come upon an opening, vast and wide, leading to a most beautiful and majestic waterfall that dives torrentially into a deep blue pool. The sight is breathtaking. They stop for a moment to take in and absorb the wonder. They gaze into each other's eyes and only hold each other so very close, for what seems like an eternity.

The sounds and smells of the forest suddenly come alive. It seems as though all of the birds, and small creatures that had kept themselves hidden, are now vibrantly alive. They sing their songs and chatter their praises in a serenade for the lovers in their midst. The plants, flowers, mosses and grasses release their scents into the air...surrounding the lovers with a sultry and sensual aroma...enticing them...teasing them...leading them deeper in their passionate embrace.

Beneath their feet lay a thick carpet of soft, fresh moss, spreading throughout and leading to the bank of the warm and tranquil waters that

lay only a few feet away. He holds his lover tightly in his powerful arms, pressing her body close to his own. They kiss passionately, their tongues dancing wildly in and out, between and over lips and teeth, tasting the honey, sweetness of each other's juices.

Their breathing grows heavy and intense, their blood begins to rise, and their passions become unleashed. His hands slowly caress the soft warm flesh beneath his lover's dress. Then, he grabs hold of her skirt and pulls the dress over her head, strewing it across the ground. She, at the same time reaches out and tears away his shirt. She pulls and tugs indelicately, hurriedly removing his shorts...

Here they are, beautiful and naked before each other, deep in a tropical forest as the sun warms their bodies causing their passions to rise even higher. They fall to the soft, mossy carpet beneath them. Their arms and legs intertwined like the vines hanging from the forest trees that surround them. The heat they generate between them is intensified by the forest scents and sounds. The two lovers roll over and over, wildly kissing, pulling, tugging, stroking, feeling, sharing all the pleasures the forest would help them to know...new pleasures never experienced before...

They explore each other's bodies in the most erotic and exotic of ways. Their lips and tongues kissing and sucking and tasting every crevice and every secret place. Hands and fingers touch and feel and hold and squeeze her soft, round places and his strong, hard places. Their moist, glistening flesh now a canvas for the forest floor, painted with touches of the green and purple mosses they lay upon.

Unaware, caught in their own otherworldly fantasy, the lovers are subliminally seduced. In the background the animals grow restless...their songs become fusion...avant-garde erotica exposing, expanding the powerful, loving, lustful sensations these two possess. Scents and aromas arise and grow stronger, heavily intoxicating the lovers that Mother Nature nurtures and caresses softly to her bosom.

His strong, muscular body climbs atop his lover...his loins aching and swollen...he thrusts his pulsing, throbbing flesh inside her. She moans and cries out his name over and over...her breath grows bated...Inside she is wet and hot and he feels her steaming flesh grabbing, wanting to hold his organ inside her. He loves her gently, but firmly...moving in and out...slowly...passionately. Her tender flesh is flowing with juices and quivering at his touch...Their kisses hot and wet with tongues dashing in and out of each other's mouth.

Oh...the pleasures they feel...the eroticism of their burning aching bodies mystify their minds, unleashing their animal passions. They are

insensibly lost deeply within the other. She grabs his muscular buttocks to pull him in deeper...he responds with a lustful desire to climb inside of her quivering womb. He loves her passionately...fucks her wildly...hard and long and strong...His back is glowing and glistening with sweat. He buries his face in her breasts, sucking on her nipple...she screams out into the forest like a banshee where no human can hear...He groans and from some place very deep within him comes the most guttural, primal howl a human can make, as though his form is being ripped away. Distorted and mangled they hump and pump and thrust and grind and are transported together to some other dimension in orgasmic bliss!

These two lovers have experienced their most ancient and tribal selves. Now, they are children of the wilderness. They are the son and daughter of the primal world. Exotic animals and birds, lush colorful foliage, sultry earth, aromatic breezes, and deep blue pools of water bear witness to the passions of these lovers and their love unleashed...

Kurt Schweigman
a/k/a Luke Warm Water

Are You Hungry for Pizza?

My Uncle Verlin was 40 years my senior
When questioned about his ethnicity he would respond
"Mostly Sioux Indin', part German,
and when it comes to the drink,
full-blooded Irishmn"

Uncle Verlin lived to be an old man
Raised on a ranch,
on a South Dakota Reservation by my grandparents
Uncle Verlin was a true cowboy Indian
Living out his life like the songs Hank Williams Sr.
and Woody Guthrie lamented about

Drifting
Drinking
Leaving a trail of about a 1/2 dozen pissed off ex-wives
And children, claimed and unclaimed
Along the path of his life

One night Uncle Verlin and I polished off a fifth of whiskey
Hungry, we decided on pizza
He had seen the TV commercials of Pizza Hut
and wanted to eat at one for the first time

Upon our arrival
Teenage white kids were working
A white boy asked us from behind the counter
what we wanted to order
The biggest pizza you have with a lot of extra cheese,
Uncle Verlin said
The white kid asked what he wanted for toppings
Uncle Verlin responded
Tiny little white men
The kid behind the counter looked bewildered asking "what?"

Tiny tiny little white men on my pizza

"Uh sir we don't have that topping, do you want a different topping?"

NO! I want only tiny tiny little white men on my pizza

The white boy behind the counter now looked shit scared

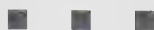
After that Uncle Verlin and I lost it

We laughed and laughed all the way home carrying our pizza
with Italian sausage topping

After all

Columbus was Italian

We thought it the next best choice for a pizza topping



Eric Sisak

The Book of Spiral

When you woke up in your bed this morning, it took you several minutes to remember your name.

You say it out loud, repeat it until it sticks. Then you try to get out of bed, but god you're tired, but god, you're god, too, so you allow yourself a good morning chuckle before hoisting your legs over the side.

Your skeleton and your bedsprings creak for each other. It would remind you of lying in a bed as a young monkey and hearing the muffled, rusty accordion groans of Mom and Dad making love, but in your brief childhood you never once heard those sounds. To you, the creaks sound like the settling of a crucified god's bones. But your ears barely acknowledge the sound. Your ears are busy.

You swat the air around your head, trying to kill the buzzing. Buzz, buzz, the memories go from left to right. Buzz, buzz, from right to left. By the time you find your landlegs, the buzzing is so steady it has become your background music.

You make your sign in the air—a blend of a question mark and a double helix—and pray to yourself the voices won't start buzzing, too. On your bad days the voices deafen you. And you can't do what you need to do today if you're huddled under your bed.

You whispered your name to yourself as you wrapped your white robe around your feeble body and shuffled down the hall to your bathroom.

You look in the mirror and remind the reflection that you are still in control. An aging king is still the king.

"The sorcerer is the sorcerer's only god," you remind the specter. You have a watery voice. Your jowls are loose.

"The sorcerer is the sorcerer's only god," you repeat, but your voice is still your voice.

The specter nods back, with perhaps a trace of skepticism, and suddenly he's laughing at you. It is a living nightmare. You never woke up, did you?

When you move your liver-spotted hands, you see trailers. Dreams and reality merged when you became a god and, maybe as a result, mornings are becoming increasingly confusing.

You feel older than the earth, because you are.

It was only after the water had burned you that you woke up again.

You have fallen asleep in the bathtub. Last you remember, you were standing and taking a shower. You try to scramble away from the fire shooting out of the nozzle, but your knees are slow to respond. When you fell down, asleep, you must have cracked your knees against the inside of the tub. You are grateful. You could have broken your hip.

You get up. You spend a moment looking for bruises, but there are so many you quickly realize it's a waste of time. Thinking of time makes you remember what you need to do today. That seems to wake you up a bit. You've already forgotten how hot the water is. Your skin is boiled red.

Your bathroom was fog as you sat on your toilet.

Your order is not as it used to be. Before you became a god, when you were a monkey, you never went to the bathroom after a shower. It would be like shampooing last and leaving that greasy-soft film all over your scrubbed skin. That is the order of a chimp that can't control his mind or a monkey who can't control his body. Or, you hope, a fading god.

You briefly wonder what category you fall in because the truth is that your bowels haven't moved in ages. But there's no bloated heat in that python coiled between your hips. You rip off two sheets but there's nothing to do with them, so you fold the sheets and place them next to the others.

Then you finally remember to turn off your shower.

You toweled off with the efficiency of a toddler.

Your thighs, wrinkled penis, gravity-battered testicles—these are still moist as you slide on your plain white underwear. You force your legs into your starched brown slacks—one leg at a time, just like any other god—and coerce a crisp brown button-down over a perfectly ironed white T-shirt.

You are tying your white shoes when you notice that your shirt is buttoned wrong. The fourth is in the fifth hole, first in the third.

You command your mind with all your might, get it right, and after only three hours you are ready.

You resist the urge to congratulate yourself, mostly because you are too busy swatting the air. Your opiate, your buzzing, never really stopped.

Your kitchen was a mess this morning.

On your way to your special basement, you look past the soggy cereal souring next to an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, the blank calendar from your local bank that hangs crooked on your refrigerator, overcooked coffee grinds that dribble a path from your silver percolator to your overflowing garbage can.

You've really let the place go, but it's easy to rationalize. Your attention, your energy, has been channeled somewhere else.



A fading god does not do dishes.

You unlocked the hidden door to your basement, teetered down, then sat in the stairwell.

It's been quite awhile since you put on the white hat and revealed yourself. Last night you considered taking your medication, but couldn't bring yourself to swallow. No one ever said being a god was easy, or that a monkey could ever hope to maintain omnipotence for long. The flesh, you know too well, is forever mortal. You are trying to smooth your forearm wrinkles while you think these thoughts.

Yes, you are older than the earth, but today your flesh must appear young. You sit in the basement stairwell and rub yourself until the buzzing decides to stop.

It is time to move. Your window of opportunity does not last long. Not these days.

"The sorcerer is the sorcerer's only god," you pronounce as you stand up. Your voice is tight.

Everything was still sharp within you as you donned your white robe, white hat, then took your first look.

A bare bulb is all that lights your room. Father Thomas is sitting exactly where he should be, bound and gagged exactly as he should be. The demon has never failed you.

He is awake, looking around with eyes that are too exhausted to look truly terrified.

He's trying to figure out where he is, you think. He's trying to understand the magic.

As you stare at him your fingers are against the door, gripping the frame with a strength you thought you'd lost...

You are pressing your hands against her breasts, whispering "I want you, I want you," in her ear then forcing down the words with your tongue. She has already unbuckled you, is digging her fingernails down your ribs. You grab her long white dress in the middle and rip it in half. She's straddling you now as you heave her against the hotel door.

She pulls her panties to one side and says, "Please, please, now." You feel the magnetism between both of you grow as your body, heart, soul, mind unite with a singularity you've never known. Your hands clutch the doorframe, hers clutch yours, and, for the first time in both of your young lives, you escape.

You eventually released the doorframe, cutting off your opiate.

Father Thomas is still in your room and you are still watching him through your one-way mirror. Without moving your eyes, you press one of the switches on your control panel. The light bulb goes out; your room

is now pitch dark. You push another switch and hear sweaty fear through your intercom.

"Welcome to heaven, father," you boom into your microphone. Then you flip another switch.

The room turns purple. All of your special objects—your talismans, amulets, and charms—become connected with black arcs and lines only visible under your purple sun. It is magnificent and you see with pride that your efforts are not wasted on Father Thomas. You are excited for him to see your white under the purple. He will be the first.

"Would you like me to kill you, now?" you ask through your microphone.

He jerks his head around, searching for the source of your voice.

"Sorry," you say. "That didn't look like a yes or a no. So I will work with you. Until you are beyond all of your monkey fear."

You haven't felt so young in a lifetime. When you unlock and open the door to your room, you look down to see that your feet are inches off the ground.

My god, you pray to yourself, this is happening.

"I am the sorcerer," you say to him. "But you will call me god."

Amber A. Stewart

Sporadic (Death by Stoning)

After 2 a.m., Tuesday, I wait for my train,
half baked, it's so muggy, underground railroad
gonna lead me to freedom, though, so I keep
"head writin'" to take my sizzlin' mind off un-
comfortable heat Nigerian woman
been sentenced to death by stoning People
protest, protestin', death by stoning for suppo-
sedly cheatin', maybe really raped my breathin'
sporadic down here, she has a baby my stomach
growlin', ain't eat since 7 p.m., it's 2 a.m., baby 'posed
to be other man's breathin sporadic, hers will
be too, gravelly, angular, fist-sized stones
and her breathing is sporadic, my heat uncom-
forable, her heat painful, heat of exposed wounds,
busted skull, dry blood, sun on broken brown skin,
heat of humiliation, degradation, Nigerian wo-
man been sentenced to death by stoning, no more baby,
no more affair (or rape), I barely stand stable,
vision blurred, stomach gurgle, tongue hang out,
this will be her soon, but I'll live to see another
moon and they protest, protestin', sorry to say,
I have a feeling she'll be stoned anyway, if
she's lucky, someone will have mercy, toss
an angular, fist-sized stone at temple, uncon-
scious, she will elevate, celebrate outer body release,
she will elevate to a higher spiritual plane, for her past
life's debts will have, at last, been paid

Lee A. Tonouchi

All Mix Up

At UC Irvine
I took Japanese
only cuz everybody
in my family
sed good. Mo bettah fo' me
if in case I like get job
cuz all da tourists in Hawai'i.

And plus
all my friends sed
going going,
come in handy.
I can translate for dem
all da newest Japanese.
Gundam animations;
no need wait for
junk English dubbed version.

BUT HO!
Frickin' hod wuz, Japanese.
Da kooky verb ting
change depending
on who you talk to—
if dey mo' up than you
den gotta be polite,
if same same
den das one noddah form,
and if lower than you
den I guess ees okay
to be RUDE.

So I ended up calling
my Grandma planny times

long distance
for help wit da homeworks.
She nevah mind me
calling da house
early in da morning
before my class started
cuz she always got up
5:00 anyway
for water da yard
and listen,
half-awake kine
to da Japanese
radio station.

In fack,
I think she liked
me calling her planny
cuz wen Grandpa wen move out
she nevah have nobody for talk
to.
My faddah mostly working
And only me call.
Nobody go visit.

I figured
wit my Grandma's help
I would ace dat class.
Cuz my grandma wuz at least
twice as old
as my Japanese teachah
who wuzn't even Japanese.
I tink he wuz Korean.

But I dunno wot wen happen.
I wuz getting all my answers

WRONG, brah.

Finally, I wen tell da teachah

one day aftah class,

"Eh, you sure you know

wotchoo talking?

My grandma wen help me, y'know."

He tilted his head at me

den titled 'em back da oddah way

den thought for two seconds

before he sed "Must be

your Grandmother doesn't speak
proper Japanese.

Perhaps it's

rural Japanese

or provincial."

Den he axed wot part of

Japan she wuz from.

Frickin' A!!!

Finally somebody ask,

"Wot village I from?"

I tried for commit

dat li'lo bit of informations

to permanent memory,

but I guess

no mo' such ting as

permanent memory,

cuz I searched

and I searched

my head,

but I couldn't remembah.

So I jus looked at him

I dunno wotchoo talking 'bout,

shrugged my shoulders,

and walked away.

My grade wuzn't going

so good

so I called my Grandma

less and less

but I tink she missed

me calling cuz aftah awhile

she

would call

me

for see if I needed help

wit anything. She even

volunteered for ask

some of Grandpa's old

friends who knew more than her kine.

But I wuzn't taking no chances

on people witout PhD's

like Miyashiro man

or Karate man

or Ten Cen who got his name

cuz he nevah used to have more

than 10 cents to his name,

but dat wuz back in da day

so today his name probably

wuz Dollah.

Latah on

wen I came back on break

my Grandma wanted for know

wot I got in Japanese.

I toll her da report card

nevah come yet.

And jus so happen

she had da guy,

Ten Cen on da phone

so she toll me go talk to him.

But wot I wuz going say?

I nevah like tell 'em

I was tinkin of quitting Japanese

wen I nevah even tell my Grandma yet.

So I wuz all like

"Eh, Mister Ten Cen..."

Ho, I almost called him Mister Dollah.

I toll 'em yeah, my Grandma
wen help me planny, but
I got 'em all WRONG everytime
Mister Ten Cen wen laugh.
Den he wen tell me
"Da way you Grandma talk
to yo' Grandpa. Ass not
Japanee—Dat one
CHAMPURU UCHINAGUCHI!"

"Wot dat?" I wen tell
"Championship Okinawan?"

"No. Wot kine atama you get, boy?"

I could almost feel him
slap my head ova da phone.

"Champur, das ono kine
Okinawan stir-fry kaukau.
Champur Uchinaguchi mean
Okinawan,
Japanese,
Hawaiian,
English,
Pidgin,
all mix up
togeddah in one.
Only in Hawai'i, you know
get Champuru Uchinaguchi."
Only in Hawai'i,
I repeated insai my head.
Only in Hawai'i.
Ho, I guess I know
little bit of something
not too many people know, brah.
Proud for be
CHIBURU!*

*Chiburu means "head" in Okinawan language, but in Hawai'i, starting wit da ni-sei, da second generation, dey started using dat to refer to demselves. Only in Hawai'i is wea Local Okinawans refer to demselves as dat.



Vincent Toro

Freddie Prinze in Heaven (part 1)

"There was a time when
Space was not empty,"
Tia would explain,
"The night was once filled up with
Glorious multicolored stories
Of our people.
The stars you see are the ones that survived
The drought of imagination.
Each star, a story,
An S.O.S. from a dream left
Out in the universe
Stranded, Thirsty, and Dying.
They are all that is left behind as a reminder
Of where we came from
And what we are made of,
Melodrama and Melanin,
Because we are all stars
Waiting to be born,
And to die,
And to be born again."
The fire escape was our rocket ship,
Our bus ride through the Galaxy,
And *tia*, like my personal tour guide,
Would lecture at each stop on our path.

"If you take the time
You can learn to read the stars,
Then you will be able to see
The myths that have been
Buried and hidden from our kind.
The stars are a coded language.
If you stare into them long enough,
You will learn all you need to know

About their secrets,
Secrets even more fascinating than the ones
Abuela and her friends tell about each other
Over café con leche.
Every constellation is a
New language to be learned.
Study them as you would your schoolbooks.

Look!
Right above you is the big dipper.
When god is hungry he cooks his food in it.
And over to the left there you will find
The belt of Orion.
It is like the one papi uses
When you come home too late from school.
And over there,
Just behind you in the distance,
That is the Freddie Prinze constellation."

The young cynic in me
Would be quick to protest,
"There is no Freddie Prinze constellation!"

"Of course there is a Freddie Prinze constellation!
Look a little to the left,
You can make out his moustache,
And right below it,
His butterfly collar.
It's just south of the moustache
Of the Frida Kahlo constellation.
You think that the stars are only named
After Greek gods and warriors?
Puerto Ricans been around just as long as them!
Zeus on Olympus,
Man!
They stole that from the Tainos
Who worshipped Yocahu on top of El Yunque!
Do not let someone else push their
Dreams and stories on you,



We have our own,
And do not always trust
What you read in a book.
Let Freddie's life be a lesson to you!"

Tia made me promise to never be
A story they could purchase,
To learn the true stories of the stars
That Graffiti bomb our names
Onto the walls of forever
Like the neighborhood kids
With skateboards and spray cans
Giving names to the otherwise anonymous
By leaving their tags on the walls of schools,
Dead planets, and no trespassing signs
In a fight to leave their imprint on time's mind.

And so I vowed then to protect our stories.
I vowed with all of my tiny, Sorta-Rican heart.

The cars below us imitated
The rotation of the constellations above them,
While deep into the Brooklyn evening,
We laughed as the world made love to itself,
Dancing a great, big, interplanetary merengue.

We aimed our gazes at the sky
Until bedtime made its presence,
And I went to sleep that night
Dreaming of Freddie Prinze in Heaven.

Rex Tyler

The Moral Equivalent of Incest

Frank is 65 and retired.

He had a rather successful but not very spectacular career as an academic at a small college in the West. With his former wife and two grown children many miles away, he finds himself very much alone now. Though a few relatives are nearby, his contacts with them are at best only intermittent. His visits with former colleagues and other acquaintances are infrequent, too. Essentially a thoughtful and contemplative—some might say philosophical—type of person, Frank spends most of his time reading and writing but also walking for exercise.

Having a long career of over forty years, which was broken up several times for military service, graduate training, and the like, he welcomed retirement and eased into it several years before by starting research on a book. Now that the book is finished, he is looking for other projects of that nature. He found the intellectual exercise of writing the book a rewarding and transitional experience into retirement, much like former basketball great and United States Senator Bill Bradley did when he left his several careers behind.

Enjoying rather good health and the occasional trip both at home and abroad, Frank should be rather content if somewhat lonely, and he is. Yet, for most of his inner life, he has been haunted by the admonition that the “unexamined life is not worth living.” Too busy doing other things has usually been his excuse for putting off the examination year after year. Now such an excuse is harder to defend and time is rapidly getting short. To his credit, some of his writings, which are somewhat autobiographical, are partial examinations in that they probe many of the public things done during an academic lifetime. While some private thoughts and actions are exposed as well, only a few hints of the inner man to come through.

For instance, he has long been convinced that life in general and his life in particular has essentially been the conflict of opposites. Thus philosophers like Hegel and Marx seemed correct to use the dialectical method to explain change but sometimes it is difficult to see a synthesis emerging among fundamental differences. Opposites persist. There will always be conflict between freedom and order, the individual and the group, and so on. Also conflicts that are seemingly resolved are actually



done so only temporarily, and most serious problems that seemed to be solved are usually only hopped over or replaced by much larger ones. At best only tentative solutions are arrived at when it comes to conflict among essentials. Perhaps, as Christian moralist Niebuhr suggests, the unintended, or even the opposite, is more likely to occur when we try to manipulate things to arrive at a solution. Hence, while progress can happen, two steps forward may eventually involve one step backward. To change the metaphor, real progress may be nothing more than the swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction.

Building on these fundamental beliefs, Frank's study of American History suggests that two opposing traditions, the Idealist and the Realist, have been in perpetual conflict since the founding of the Republic. The differences in their assumptions and values, for example, are readily seen in such conflicts as the Declaration of Independence v. the Constitution and Thomas Jefferson and his followers v. Alexander Hamilton and his supporters. Such serious tensions in American society made the rise of Experimentalism or Pragmatism almost inevitable in order to find a "middle way"—a means by which conflicts can be addressed and hopefully solved. Again, perhaps few were ever completely solved but life could go on with the swing of the pendulum.

Searching for his own fundamental personal beliefs, Frank concluded that he favored—even wished for—Idealism as a way of life but feared Realism as the world's way but yet hoped Experimentalism could be a workable alternative for at least critical times. So for him the basic goal in life should be to limit the influence of Realism by helping to depoliticize issues as much as possible so that they can be considered primarily on their moral and instrumental merits. The worst development in the 20th century, as Frank saw it, was the rise of the "urge of power"—the attempt to politicize virtually everything by the totalitarianism of both the right and left. The defeat of both is a major victory, a reversal of a trend, but the "urge to power" will not go away very easily on a personal or even a societal level. Hence, while Frank's optimism has been strengthened, he remains rather pessimistic about the human condition. In his own life, he tends to move back and forth—like a pendulum—between his hopes (Experimentalism) and his fears (Realism) and has all but concluded that his wishes (Idealism) are most likely to be realized in the next life, if such exists, rather than in this one.

If all of this is true for him, how should he try to live his personal life? This is Frank's major question as he passes through September into the autumn of his life. His short answer is to live for reconciliation and transcendence in the context of duty to higher values.

Having arrived at the above as something of an analytical framework to examine his life's conflicts, Frank was ready to consider a basic one that has been very troublesome for him. Many years ago a psychiatrist friend said that the major conflict of the time was racial—black v. white—and should that be dealt with, the next one would be sexual—male v. female. His belief about the latter was based on the nature of the psychological problems he encountered in his practice among men.

Frank was inclined to agree with his friend. As he saw it, a nagging personal problem—probably the central one of his inner life—was male v. female. He first became quite aware of it when he was quite young, perhaps as early as age 7 or 8 but certainly by age 9. Although it seemed to go away or at least was relegated to the subconscious during his late teens, it came back to haunt him again at age 45 and continues to do so some 20 years later.

Like so many problems of conflict, Frank has had great difficulty actually defining the essential nature of the issue. "Male v. female" is so general that little is learned from its use. In fact most of his struggle, especially during the last 20 years, has been concerned with actually defining the true nature of the problem itself without being led astray by symptoms or other things on the edges. He believes that if he can only get the nature of the problem right he can deal with it to a degree. He may not be able to solve it—probably he won't—but perhaps he can transcend it enough to end the haunting feeling that has plagued him for such a long time.

While believing that both nature and nurture are involved to some degree, Frank has given up trying to weigh the significance of each. He accepts both as factors and tries to define the problem more in terms of overt behaviors rather than ultimate causes. Hence, he may be putting aside any chance for solutions but given his belief that deep conflicts are rarely resolved anyway, only some sort of reconciliation or transcendence is probably all that can be hoped for in the long run.

Since he believes that the root of the conflict goes back to early childhood, he has tried to reconstruct from memory—with the help of various things such as old photographs and the like—what kind of behaviors he engaged in some 60 years ago. This was not easy. But if the "child is the father of the man," as the poets say, this is absolutely necessary to try to do.

The setting for Frank's behaviors was within a village nuclear family of father, mother, and sister who were ages 37, 31, and nearly 5 respectively when he was born during the Great Depression. This family, like most others in the village, was neither rich nor poor by the standards of the time, but many comforts taken for granted today were few in number. For



example, Frank and his sister Janus never had separate bedrooms, and the one they occupied together until she left home at age 19 was so small that they had to share a common dresser and for a couple of years a double bed. While the father and mother certainly had a significant impact on Frank's behavior, he believes that Janus, mainly because of the sharing arrangements and other contacts with her and her things, was more important.

Perhaps because Janus was 5 years older and was a bright and well-behaved student in school, she was always being held up by his parents and even some of his teachers as a model for Frank to follow. She filled that role in other ways as well because she was without a doubt the classic tomboy into her early teens. Rarely playing with dolls or other toys of her sex, Janus was more likely to be found hitting a softball, skating on ice or a sidewalk (depending on the season), riding her bicycle, or climbing up the poles of a swing set. Being so much younger, not as bright, and rather more delicate physically, Frank was usually unable to perform as well as Janus. Thus, in these activities as well as in games of various types with her, he usually came out less well than she, who was also a strong and determined competitor in all things. When Frank became a better than average baseball player in his late teens, he knew, though he found it hard to admit, that competitive Janus had a lot to do with his success. Perhaps his academic success, in part, can be explained in this way as well.

Though not much is remembered today, Frank believes that his mother did things to promote what perhaps can be called the unisex relationship between him and his sister in the early years. Family photographs of Frank and Janus, about ages 4 and 9, show them in similar "sailor" shirts, though in gender appropriate long pants and skirt. While Janus wore dresses to school, as was the custom then, she was usually in shorts, slacks or jeans at home. Frank's clothes were also something of a unisex mixture. Pictures to about age 3 show him in dresses, but pants are common after that. He was told many years ago that he had long, beautiful curls in those early years that his mother only reluctantly cut off.

Although Frank's memory of such things is weak, he believes that many of his clothes were passed down from others, especially from his sister. His most vivid recollection is a girl's green swimsuit with a short skirt that may have belonged to an older cousin before it came to Janus and ultimately to him. He probably started to wear it frequently during the summer months when he was about 7 or 8 years old. To cool off, he and a neighborhood boy a year older often played in water from the garden hose.

Because of a very humiliating experience with the suit not long after, Frank keeps a long-remembered set of events rather clearly in his mind.

Apparently one early June when he was 9, he went to a neighboring town for a couple of days to visit his cousin Angela who was 11. One of their activities together was a trip to the public swimming pool. They went fully clothed and changed into their suits in the respective male and female dressing rooms. Frank made his change into the green suit among a number of other boys his age and older, none of whom he knew—thank heaven! Although they said nothing, he felt their eyes staring at him in his girl's suit as they changed into their boys' trunks. He was so embarrassed that he ran out to the pool, jumped in, and kept the water neck high the whole time he was there. Since it was early summer and the water was still pretty cold, his lips started to turn blue in a short time, and Angela suggested they get dressed to return home. Before they left, Frank had to go through the humiliating experience of a clothing change once more.

If that were not enough for one visit with his cousin, Frank had another trying experience, this time with her at the center of the matter. He had to sleep in a double bed with her. Although Frank had slept with his sister for a time, they had moved to separate beds in the same room a few years before, perhaps as Janus had become less the tomboy and more girl-like in appearance. In any event, Frank's aunt and cousin were not ones to argue with as he was assigned his place next to Angela, but he recalls experiencing great embarrassment at bedtime.

When he awoke at dawn the next morning, his feelings were even more difficult to handle because his cousin, who was still sound asleep and coverless, had a large naked area between the top and bottom of her pajamas, the result of their being pulled far apart as she turned over during the night. Frank had to look away very quickly as he felt sexual arousal.

How else did Frank behave as a result if these experiences with Angela? He obviously felt that he could not keep things bottled-up completely—everything could not be repressed. Therefore, while his aunt and uncle were away one morning and he and Angela were playing together outside, he excused himself to go inside to use the bathroom. Instead of doing so, he went to his cousin's dresser, opened her underwear drawer, wrapped a pair of her pink panties around his penis, and masturbated.

Whether he had been doing this before with his sister's panties, Frank does not recall for sure, but he believes he had. He thinks it may have all started with his first wearing of the green swimsuit—with its panty bottom, short skirt, and full top. Since the bottom was designed for girls, it was tight across his genitals and gave him some sort of sexual stimulation.

Although whatever happened elsewhere before his experiences at Angela's is not recalled, Frank has some memories of what happened



over several years thereafter at his home. His basic behavior was to repeat numerous times with his sister's panties what he had done with his cousin's. Janus, now 14 and much less the tomboy, had a number of very attractive pink panties in her drawer of their dresser, and soon Frank went beyond his previous behavior. He began to wear them.

Frank recalls a major inner struggle in trying to decide from time to time to wear them. Should he or shouldn't he? There was always much guilt in doing so but great pleasure and greater relief after they were on, especially if masturbation followed.

Yet he was so confused and burdened about the strong urge to wear Janus' panties that he decided to let an outside factor make the decision for him. During the summer following the visit with Angela, he began to deliver evening newspapers, and one woman customer had the practice of hanging her panties to dry on her enclosed porch. Frank decided that whenever her panties were there, he would put on a pair of his sister's.

Frank soon began to search through bags of old clothes in the attic for girl's clothes to try on. Once he found an old bra which he immediately put on and stuffed objects in the cups to fill them out. He enjoyed this but also felt guilty.

Perhaps his most vivid memory involves an experience he had one Sunday morning several years later while his mother and sister were attending church and his father was away. After removing his clothes, he put on a pair of Janus' panties and decided to add others over one another until he was wearing perhaps 8 or 9 at once. The pressure from so many produced such sexual stimulation that he, who ejaculated now when he masturbated, soiled all the panties before he could get them off. Panic! What should he do before his mother and sister returned home an hour or so later? He hung them up to dry over several chairs, and fortunately for him, they dried enough to be returned to Janus' drawer before anyone returned home.

Frank well remembers another close call and still another that was a disaster. Concerning the former, he had gone to the attic one early evening to put on a pair of panties and just as he had his pants off, his mother started coming up the stairs to remove some laundry drying on the line. He immediately sat down on a box and quickly unfolded some large pieces of paper over his lower body. Apparently his mother saw nothing and soon departed downstairs with her dry clothes.

The next time Frank's luck ran out, though he cannot remember if the two events were sequential. He had been wearing a pair of Janus' panties under his clothes to school, and one night he left them on under his pajamas. When it was time to get up for school the next morning, Janus

was rather slow getting dressed in her bed across the room from him. He had hoped she would be out of the room earlier, and so he had to stall. His mother, always wanting Frank to be punctual, came into his room, pulled him from beneath the covers, and took his pajamas off. Seeing the panties, she merely said, "How can you go to the bathroom with these on?" With Janus looking on, he tried to return under the covers saying again and again that he was "cold." Nothing more was ever said about this incident.

Whether this was the end of his wearing Janus' panties and/or other girl's clothes, Frank cannot recall. He believes he continued to masturbate with them around his penis until his sister's marriage and departure from home at age 19. He was 14.

Frank had very mixed feelings about Janus' leaving, but deep down he was actually happy. Sometime, exactly when he can't remember, he and his sister ceased to be unisex "pals" and became rather bitter rivals. Perhaps after she entered high school, she began to taunt and tease him a great deal and constantly referred to him as "little brother" which Frank detested mainly because it was said sarcastically. Being more sophisticated and brighter than Frank, she seemed to be able to do such things in a very clever way with Frank reacting with overt anger. Hence, Frank always believed that she was able to get away with "murder" while he caught "hell" from their parents. Many years later when Frank and Janus became close again as adults she revealed after she and her husband had been in marriage counseling that she came to realize that she really hated men. She thought the source of this feeling was from the difficulty she had with their father. Frank now thinks most of his problems with Janus came from the same source.

As Frank entered adolescence, he was not comfortable around girls. He seemed to have two fears. First, though sexually attracted to girls, he was afraid he could not control his urges near them, and this caused him to have guilt feelings. He often seemed excessively religious at this time, perhaps because of these feelings. Second, though he admired girls for their intellects—and perhaps the ones he liked best were the brightest ones—he was always afraid he would be manipulated and humiliated by them. He felt rather defenseless when associating with them because his mother always told him to be a "nice guy," especially with girls, and not to "fight" with them. Being the perfect "little gentleman," which she seemed to want most from him, made him very vulnerable, he thought.

Whether his mother, sister, aunt, cousin or any female was "out" to humiliate, manipulate, embarrass, humble, frustrate, etc. him "on purpose," Frank does not know for sure, but he believes their actions somewhat speak for themselves. At any rate, his perceptions of females and their

apparent intentions during his adolescence made him avoid them as much as possible. He dealt with this and perhaps other troublesome situations by becoming highly active—some might say too active—in athletics, especially baseball. For most of his teen years he seemed to “live and die” for baseball and for the fortunes of the then Brooklyn Dodgers.

What about Frank’s father, only hinted at so far? Frank saw him as being on the sidelines giving orders to everyone and not much more. Very much the authoritarian who felt he had to give no reasons for his orders and behavior generally, his father was very difficult to live with. Tension in the family seemed to be high most of the time, and Frank often tried to assume the role of peacemaker. He really wanted to withdraw or escape, and baseball provided some help. Janus’ early marriage, which was probably not wise, was an escape for her. Despite his problems with Janus, Frank’s sympathies were usually with her in disputes with the father. He felt the same way when the disputes were between mother and father.

Perhaps Frank would have felt differently had he been close to his father, but he felt one thing: rejection. Frank believes that his father really wanted little to do with him and often nothing at all. Take the sport of baseball, for example, the game often said to unite fathers and sons in America. This game was not only extremely important to young Frank but to others of his age who were Depression and World War II children. Since there was little money and not much to do, baseball seemed to offer a little hope for the future of deprived kids. Hence, many fathers played with their sons, organized and supported the teams, and watched their games. Frank’s father did none of these. He recalls his father playing catch with him only once, taking him to a baseball game only once, and never seeing Frank play ball at all. Frank’s further recollections about other father-son activities, such as fishing, hunting, and scouting, are similar, even though his father was an avid fisherman and hunter.

But Frank’s most painful memory about rejection occurred during the last month or two of his senior year in high school. Two events were the highlight of that year as well as for Frank’s entire school career: the senior play and graduation. Receiving top honors in both, Frank was given the title role in the play and delivered the valedictory address during graduation. When Frank’s mother asked his father to attend these two events, he refused. She began to cry, and Frank stepped in to negotiate a compromise, saying that attendance at graduation only was fine with him. Very reluctantly, his father agreed to attend that event.

Less than two months later, Frank’s father died rather suddenly following an operation in the hospital while Frank was playing in a baseball

game. He always considered this ironic and perhaps appropriate because the game had been such an escape for him. His father's death produced some grief but really more relief, Frank always felt.

Very much in character, Frank's mother, a strong and able person, immediately took a full-time job so he could go off to college, and to help with a minimal scholarship he had won. While Frank experienced some difficulties in his relationship with his mother as suggested before, he easily overlooked them because—like taking on the job—she tried hard to be both mother and father to him while he was growing up. She helped him with school work, scout activities, and the like. Most important for Frank, she attended his many athletic contests both at home and away, and had she had athletic ability would probably have played catch with him. Some of the best memories Frank has are attending several major league baseball games with her—just the two of them.

If Frank were asked to sum up his basic problem with his mother, it was that she was too controlling, perhaps something not unexpected from someone trying to be both mother and father. Hence, Frank went away to college—when he was virtually on his own for the first time—he needed several years to really grow up: to become his own person. For the first time in his life he experienced the near ending of his family: father dead; sister married with children in another state; and Frank miles away from home at college for four years at least.

However, in many respects Frank's behavior did not change a great deal for a couple of years. Baseball was still his great love, and since he had professional ambitions, he hoped to play in college much as he had done in high school. For nearly two years he did so. Therefore, his attitudes towards and relationships with females did not change much. During these same years, his relationship with his mother did not change greatly either as he tried to come home whenever he could, which meant many weekends and during vacations. He did have some problems when returning home early on because several times his mother insisted that he sleep in a double bed with her. The reason given was that the house was cold. As usual Frank complied with her requests but felt the experiences had a degrading effect on him by encouraging thoughts about his mother he should not have. The mornings after these experiences Frank found it necessary to masturbate. No panties were involved because Frank never had the urge to use or wear his mother's clothing.

By his second year in college, Frank finally realized that he didn't have enough talent to play baseball regularly in college or professionally. Perhaps for most people this would have been obvious long ago, but since baseball

was a “way of life” for Frank, it took time for reality to set in. If so much of his life had been absorbed by baseball, what now? Fortunately, Frank had a more adequate substitute: his academic studies. Being brighter than average, he was able to excel in his courses during the last two years of college and was therefore invited to enter graduate school to study for a master’s degree.

Though Frank didn’t see Janus very often during this period, their relationship greatly improved. Having had two children not far apart, Janus thought their births would help solve the marriage problems she was experiencing, but the situation got only worse. She telephoned Frank for advice, and he suggested counseling and offered to leave college to support her and the children if she and her husband parted. Janus was able to patch up her marriage but always remembered Frank’s willingness to sacrifice his college education for her. In the years ahead she became Frank’s biggest booster as he went from one academic achievement to another. And Frank considered her his most important confidant.

After completing his master’s degree, military service, and two more years of graduate school, Frank decided to teach the following year but spent the summer with Janus who had an illness that required a major operation. With her husband working away from the area much of the time and her children staying with her mother in another state, Janus would have had to spend much of her recovery alone if Frank had not volunteered to stay with her. Again, Janus appreciated this very much.

During this month together, they became very close, almost “unisexuals” once again. But one day after Janus had almost fully recovered, she came into his bedroom while he was resting on the bed. She was wearing only a thin blouse and very short shorts. Having lost some weight as a result of her sickness, she appeared much like she did in her teens. With the light shining on her in a figure-flattering way, Frank experienced a profound sexual desire for her. Feeling very guilty, he turned away quickly and tried to forget this experience, but down through the years he never could.

As Frank and Janus repaired their relationship over several years before this event happened, Frank’s opinion of women changed and he began dating a little. When he arrived at his new job, he immediately looked over the single women there and found one very attractive. While Frank didn’t realize it at the time, he became attracted to her because he thought she was like Janus in many ways. Tall and slender with a nice figure, Connie was very bright, clearly much smarter than Frank. Apparently because of her intellect, she enjoyed challenging men on their own turf but most men felt intimidated by her and backed away. Yet, she wanted

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a man because she wanted to have children, and Frank felt that he was ready for marriage as well. They had a rather short courtship but didn't marry until the following summer.

It wasn't very long after their marriage that he realized that a mistake had probably been made. His mistake was that he thought Connie was like Janus in so many ways that she would behave like her. But Connie really wanted to be a rival who ultimately gained control rather than a partner who shared decision-making. An only child from a rather well-to-do family, she had been the center of attention and her father's "little princess." Hence, cooperation with others was never an important value for her but self-interest was. On the other hand, Connie and Frank were compatible sexually, and perhaps this, plus the arrival of their two children, made their marriage last as long as it did.

But 20 years ago, things began to fall apart. As Frank saw it, Connie became more and more unwilling to share decision-making on important matters. As the years passed, she became more secretive about her thoughts and more likely to use deception and manipulation to get what she wanted rather than discussing things openly and above board. After the children graduated from high school, she left on her own.

When things started going wrong 20 years ago, Frank experienced the return of the strong urge to wear women's clothing, something he thought had disappeared for good during his teens. Even his sleeping with his mother at age 18 had not triggered a desire to wear panties or any other female garment or even use them during masturbation. But now with his wife and children away on a trip for several weeks, he awoke during the middle of the night with the urge to put on women's clothing. He decided to try on one of his wife's nylon nighties, but to no real satisfaction. Thus began a long period of experimentation with women's clothes to deal with the urge that would not go away.

The history of Frank's personal struggle for 20 years with this urge is long, complex, and rather boring—too boring to discuss in detail. Suffice it to say he tried nearly everything to understand and define the true nature of his problem. He read materials from scholarly monographs to popular pornography; he watched a broad range of videos from sophisticated stories to trashy sex films; he tried a number of sex toys and other things of that nature; and most frequently of all, he acquired a range of female clothing which he tried on and sometimes wore in private or under his clothes for a time, only eventually discarding almost everything.

Of all the clothes he wore, Frank almost immediately felt that the key to understanding lay in one item: panties. At the outset, he tried his wife's

but felt right away that he had to have his own. By the way, the word “felt” was also a keyword for Frank because feeling rather than thinking guided so much of what he did. If it felt right, he continued doing what he tried, and if it did not, he stopped almost immediately or soon thereafter. While he never thought of himself as a “feely” person, he believed a problem like this had to be dealt with that way. At any rate, he continued his experiments with panties, *per se*, although he discontinued focusing on such things as style, size, and many colors.

Concerning the last named, he began to believe as time passed that three colors had some importance: pink, green, and black. Hence, he mainly bought panties of these colors for years, often wearing them under his clothes for long periods of time. His thinking was that regular use would result in at least one of two things: either some significant insights about the nature of his problem would manifest themselves or the problem itself would disappear as a result of the meaningless nature of so many habitual experiences over time.

One day while casually looking through the numerous pairs he had acquired, Frank focused on one, and the thought “Patty’s pink panties” popped into his head. This brought back the childhood memory of a little playmate who lived across the street. The same age, she and Frank grew up together, and Frank frequently saw her pink panties hanging out to dry or even on her when her skirt blew up. Although rather a cute girl, Patty, an only child, seemed to be rather spoiled and inclined “to put on airs” as Frank’s mother observed on occasion. Yet, Frank had often found her attractive, but they never dated.

Nevertheless, Frank believed this thought and memory of her might be of some significance. Again and again he wore these panties, often masturbating in them. Eventually he came to the conclusion, an important insight he felt, that “ownership” was important. Ever since he had stopped wearing his wife’s panties and buying his own, he thought the “his” was important, though he had been tempted from time to time to steal panties from various women. Now Frank felt that *his* ownership was not significant, but what was was whom in his mind was the “owner”—whom the panties were associated with. Hence, this particular pair of panties represented Patty—a metaphor for her. So Frank came to believe that panties were important for him both literally and figuratively.

About the same time he arrived at this insight, Frank decided to begin his other reflections back into early childhood in hope that other insights would be forthcoming. It was at that time he recalled his experiences at his cousin’s house, mentioned before, and decided to spend an entire weekend

with old photographs, toys, and the like trying to remember as many details as possible.

What struck him most of all, in light of the Patty insight, was the use of Angela's panties to masturbate. Clearly, those panties represented her; hence, he was in his own mind having sex with her!

What was going on here? Although Frank had studied some psychology at college, he was not a follower of any particular school of thought, but he believed a Freudian approach might be helpful here. So for purposes of a superficial analysis, he used the concepts and framework of the id, superego, and ego—the last as the mediator between the first two.

Using these to consider his experiences at Angela's house, Frank felt that sleeping with her simulated his id greatly but his superego—represented by his cousin, aunt and the incest taboo generally—made him feel guilty about his urges, but they could not be repressed entirely. Therefore, his ego found a workable solution: have sex in private with something representing his cousin rather than with Angela herself.

Since Frank thought that he had engaged in this type of activity before at home, he began to think the unthinkable, an even more alarming incestuous thought. Was all this really about a desire to have sex with his sister Janus—one of the major taboos of all? No wonder this had been such a long and painful struggle, if this were true.

The idea hit Frank like a "ton of bricks" and so he had a lot of long, hard thinking to do. At about the same time this was unfolding, Frank thought that he had arrived at another insight that seemed to be something of the classic clash of opposites or near opposites. He now saw his problem this way: to have a girl, he had to be a girl. While at the outset he did not completely understand, he thought this meant that he could only have a meaningful sexual relationship with a woman if he were a woman, too. Of course such an interpretation raised all kinds of questions in the area of what once was called deviate sexual behavior: homosexuality, transvestitism, and the like. Frank soon rejected things of this nature as his problem and like the Patty-panties insight began to think about these two elements in figurative ways related to his behavior.

Frank posed this question for himself: if his strong basic sexual desire was for his sister Janus (and perhaps for Angela as well), and if the taboo against incest made satisfaction of this desire impossible in a literal sense, how could it be dealt with figuratively which might not completely solve the problem but could produce some reconciliation and perhaps transcendence, all that can be hoped for anyway?

After much reflection, his short answer rather crudely put was: to “get into her panties,” you have to get into her panties. What he meant was that putting on panties literally would enable him figuratively through fantasy to have the sexual experience he desired. In other words, masturbating in Janus’ panties while he wore them was the moral equivalent of having sex with her. The social taboo against incest made literal sexual relations with Janus impossible, but it didn’t prevent figurative relations. Clearly everything started with panties, as Frank had thought for a long time. But why must they be worn when, at Angela’s house, the actual wearing did not seem necessary? Why the need to put them on?

First, Frank felt that the act at his cousin’s, as well as at his house, without wearing the panties probably reflected the nature of the situation: limited time and the lack of complete privacy. Someone might walk in on him as his mother had done years before. Thus, his need to wear them was probably there but the circumstances required something else.

Second, Frank believed that the need itself was probably directly related to the wearing of the green swimsuit which if it were not a causative factor, per se, was certainly one that strongly supported an urge rooted in something probably unknown to him. Exact causes of human behavior are always difficult to identify precisely. At any rate, Frank felt the best way to understand the significance of the swimsuit was to posit two consecutive periods of time in his relationship with Janus, which he called the Unisex and the Separate Sex. He thought the first could also be called the Pre-Sex Period. What separated the two periods involved the growth and development of Frank and his sister sexually.

During the Unisex Period as described before, Frank and Janus were very much alike—and strongly encouraged to be so—in many ways with Janus, the tomboy, serving as the model for Frank and even providing him with her clothes to wear, including the swimsuit. But as Janus grew into puberty and Frank developed sexual awareness (the Separate Sex Period), many of the old habits and practices of the Unisex Period persisted into the new Separate Sex Period.

Thus, Frank continued to wear his sister’s swimsuit in the second period, when he should not have, and it produced two effects on him: sexual stimulation and sexual humiliation. Being so young, Frank was an innocent with respect to cause and effect here and probably failed to understand what was happening. But the people in charge, mainly women, were not completely unaware of the impact on Frank.

He believed essentially the same thing happened when he was required to sleep with Angela, that is, sexual stimulation and sexual

humiliation which in this instance resulted in feelings of both guilt and frustration.

In hindsight now after so many years, Frank felt his ego took control in both cases and provided two responses that he was able to handle in private. With regard to the swimsuit: since its wearing, with its panties, was required of him even in humiliating situation, he protested on his own by masturbating in panties. That experience brought both relief and pleasure. Concerning sleeping with his cousin: since having sex with Angela was impossible, he masturbated with her panties. Again, he experienced relief and pleasure.

Thinking about this, Frank was struck by the presence of both positive and negative sexual aspects, but felt that at least two interpretations were possible. The worst interpretation was that he was manipulated by women into very humiliating situations, and the best interpretation was that habits the women had from the Unisex Period carried over into the Separate Sex Period without much thought about consequences for Frank.

How should Frank react? Should he be angry and unforgiving or should he accept things as unfortunate circumstances of habitual behavior and be forgiving? Having developed in childhood, which carried over into adulthood, what now appears to be a permanent urge to wear panties to deal with sexual stimulation and humiliation, what should he do at this advanced stage of his life?

Frank felt he had every right to be very angry and unforgiving because he believed that he was not totally responsible for the urge he found so troublesome in his life. While perhaps some of the urge was rooted in his nature, he thought most of it came from nurture. But who was really responsible here: father, mother, sister, aunt, cousin, wife, all of these, others? This question seemed impossible to answer precisely, and of course two (probably the most important), father and mother, were dead.

Besides, given his age and his desire for reconciliation and transcendence, guilt-finding after so many years did not seem appropriate. In addition, Janus—his most likely target—had suffered too during their childhood together and in an unfortunate marriage. Moreover, she and Frank had settled their differences long ago and were close now. Again, what should he do?

Reviewing the entire situation, Frank feels the most meaningful and satisfactory behavior for his is the following ritual: whenever the urge comes upon him, he undresses completely in private before a mirror, and beginning with a black G-string and a pair of pink panties representing Janus, he puts them on, observing that he is Frank but is becoming not-Frank

and Janus instead, though not-Janus is also there in the mirror's reflection. Other Janus associated garments are added: bra, green swimsuit, stockings, etc., until a wig (black for Janus' hair color) and lipstick are put on as well.

When Frank completes this, the image he sees in the mirror is a combination of Frank/not-Frank and Janus/not-Janus as it should be, and hence a person with its own identity. Who is it?

Frank is not sure, but the legendary figure of Greek mythology Hermaphroditus comes to mind. Son of Hermes and Aphrodite (the goddess of love), he was embraced by the nymph Salmacis who asked the gods that she might forever be united with him. The gods agreed and merged the two bodies into one, neither exclusively male nor female. If Frank would alter this, he would see himself as asking the gods for union with Janus.

Whether this is the correct identity of the image in the mirror or not, Frank nevertheless experiences sexual arousal and not much stimulation is needed to have what the French call "the little death." This experience elevates Frank to another level, much like floating on air, of contentment and unity but above all reconciliation and transcendence with Janus. If the "big death" is like this, Frank will be eternally happy, for the Idealists will have been proved right after all.

Martha Modena Vertreace-Doody

Marie van Goethem—after Degas

What do you want?, he asks before he starts.

I tell him I want to be
the most famous dancer in the world.

People laugh when he shows how
he shapes me—standing on a socle
carved from a wooden floor board
from a ballet school.

"The Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen"—
he draws my every angle—a slip of a girl
with or without my clothes.

He haunts rehearsals,
performances hour after hour—
as I lace my slippers,
stretch at the barre, rest on my sister's lap—
paints page after page of me
in his sketchbooks

pastels prints watercolors—
so I say, yes, make me
immortal—a wax sculpture—wire frame
for my trunk, hemp
for my arms, legs.

Clasp my hands behind me,
aim my chin at his face, raise my flat chest,
angle my feet in fourth
to spring en pointe. He
hates me, his eyes say. Working girl. Thinks
himself my better, his quick studies of money
wrapped in gauze.

On back of a sketch,
he jots the name of a dollmaker,
for my horsehair braid, green satin bow;
dressmaker, for pink ballet shoes.

My father, a tailor; my mother,



a washer-woman, could sew starlight
in serge—not me, a sow's ear.

My silk faille bodice—everything
waxed over.

Arch my spine. Belly forward. Again.

I will never know him—
this old man whose stained hands
no girl dare warm.

He will never let me go,
my muslin tutu frayed
like tulle wings
of a fallen angel.

H.E. Wright

Eating Ethnic in Tooele, UT

I can affirm that it was a buffet.
Also, that there were chopsticks available

Under the counter.

But it took the waitress
A few hard minutes to locate them.
I can attest to tasting
A hint of coconut milk in some unnamed dish.
And, I'm pretty sure,
Curry played a part in a severe rice.

On occasion, I heard what I can only describe
As missionary pidgin Vietnamese
Limping out from the kitchen sounds.

But everyone here is white anyway.
We do all look alike.
And if we dance, well—
I've never actually seen it.



Emanuel Xavier

Legendary

In memory of Pepper LaBeija

There are Gods amongst us in these ghettos
so black, so fierce,
so brown, so beautiful,
Their time on earth may be as oppressive as ignorance
limited to the demons flowing in their blood
but after safely passing over back to the clouds
the wind will still carry their auras and prophecies
their bones will still beat drums for their children to dance
the phoenix will still rise from the flames of Paris with hope in womb

There are Gods amongst us in these ghettos
so brown, so fierce,
so black, so beautiful,
That if you spend too much time caught up in yourself
You just might miss Him that is goddess, she that is god, they that
are legends
Working the runway as if walking on water
Reaching the stage to that promised land
where "peace" is not ridiculed and the only war worth fighting
for
is protecting your child from the terrorist acts of a mainstream
America
where "reading" is an act of learning
not degrading words used to disguise fragility and fractured
dreams
where "shade" is a shadow you walk in to avoid the light
but who wants to stay out of the warmth of the sun?
If you waste your time trying to be a false prophet
robed in attitude and labels to obscure the insecurity
you may fail to recognize their divinity and miracles
parting the crowds, resurrecting from the floor, scoring tens of
commandments,

because trophies will not feed the hungry, coat the homeless,
hide the scars,
Grand Prizes will not bring Lazarus or LaBeija back from the dead
they will just sit in your closet, fake idols gathering dust, before the
gold paint chips away
You cannot sell them for freedom
You cannot trade them in for love

There are Gods amongst us in these ghettos
so black, so fierce,
so black, so beautiful,
so brown, so fierce,
so brown, so beautiful,
Watch them carefully and say your prayers as they enter the
ballroom
angel wing feathers decorating skin recrafted over silicone and
martyred colors
See the Gods dream, see the Gods give, see the Gods live,
They exist in the spaces where white is not the only hue that
represents purity
They will not battle to your rhythms and beats
click, spin and dip simply for amusement
They will not teach those who share their souls and names to hate
Their heartbeats are louder than the blaring speakers

You want realness...look at your hands
are they red from the revolution or from the blood of
your own sisters

There are Gods amongst us in these ghettos
so black, so brown, so fierce, so beautiful, so bright
Look up towards the heavens and pray
then look at yourself in the mirror and say
'Stars are not only found out in the sky but in ourselves'

Murat Yazan

Never this lifetime

I will never be an astronaut. I'll never be the handsome dashing young man that all girls are interested in, but his only focus in life is to "Get the job done." I'll never know what it's like to see Earth from thousands of miles away through a tiny window. I'll never know what it feels like to be in zero gravity, in orbit, in a spaceship blasting into outer space. I'll never know.

I will never be: a doctor; a police officer; a politician; a nuclear scientist; a rocket engineer; a CEO; a principle, teacher-of-the-year, a world famous poet; author; model; photographer; an architect; shipbuilder; skyscraper construction worker; a librarian; gunsmith; weapons designer; inspector; geologist; archaeologist; sociologist; psychologist; rock star; alcoholic; drug addict; murderer; thief; pastor; preacher; Father; priest; Imam; prostitute; animated TV character; host of a children's show; sane.

I will never be: CaptainoftheFootballTeam.

I will never throw the winning ball, strike out the last batter, cross the finish line—bringing home the Gold. I will never have my picture and stats on a card. I will never endorse shoes, shirts, underwear. I will never have a stadium, sports drink, or even a car named after me. I'll never know what it's like to have millions of my fans shouting my name. I will never know what it's like to have women throw their panties at me. I will never know what it's like to be every man's envy. I will never know what it's like to be every kid's hero. I'll never know.

I'll never know what it's like to let a kid down; to disappoint my fans; to lose my TV show; lose my flock; to go through withdrawal; be buried alive during a dig; know what it feels like to have designed a weapon that killed millions of babies; plunge to my death off a scaffold; watch my company collapse; hold my tongue as another rapist walks free out of the courtroom; watch a patient die. I will never know what it feels like to be blasting away toward the moon, watching the Earth falling away from my window, and suddenly, Nothing.

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About the Authors

Jonathan Alexander is Associate Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. His creative work and scholarly articles have appeared in numerous publications, including *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Salt River Review*, *SugarMule*, *Radical Teacher*, *The International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, and *Blithe House Quarterly*. Visit him online at <http://oz.uc.edu/~alexanj/>.

Shane Allison's Pushcart nominated poems have been published in *Absinthe Literary Review*, *Coal City Review*, *Chiron Review*, *The Fifth Street Review*, *Suspect Thoughts*, *Velvet Mafia*, *Lynx Eye* and numerous other online and print publications. He has work forthcoming in *New Delta Review*, *Oyster Boy Review* and *Mississippi Review*. He received his M.F.A. from New School University in New York, studying with such poetry greats as David Lehman and David Trinidad. He lives and loves in New York City.

Tracy C. Alston is a passionate writer and compassionate lawyer living in Washington, D.C., with her young daughter. Her literary works have appeared on several online sites, including *sistacircle.com*, *slowtrains.com*, and *philosophicalmother.com*. Her first novel will be published in the near future and she is currently working on a collection of poems. Ms. Alston holds degrees from Georgetown University and Catholic University.

Lucy Anderton is a Welsh/English poet who holds a B.A. in Jazz Composition from Berklee College of Music and represented Chicago at the 2000, 2001 & 2002 National Poetry Slams. The 2003 Taos Poetry Circus Open Slam Champion and the 2000 Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Award recipient, Lucy has received grant monies from the NEA and Poets and Writers, Inc. and was a 2002 and 2003 fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Lucy's work has appeared in *New York Quarterly*, *ACM*, *Rhino Poetry Magazine*, *Hammers*, *Gertrude Journal*, *After Hours*, *Chicago Cherry: A Wicker Park Anthology*, *Gnome Magazine*, and *Freedom to Speak: Poetry Slam Inc. 2002 Anthology*. She will edit the forthcoming 2003 Poetry Slam Inc. anthology, and is currently pursuing her M.F.A. in Poetry at Warren Wilson College.

Anna K. Andrade is a Brazilian-born writer who taught English in her native country before moving to the States two years ago. She now teaches English as a Second Language and Portuguese. She is currently completing her M.A. at City College of New York. "A Daughter's Secret" is her first published story.

Susan Atefat-Peckham holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her book, *That Kind of Sleep*, was a winner of the National Poetry Series Award in 2000. It was also a finalist for the Texas Institute of Letters Natalie Ornish Award. Her nonfiction manuscript, *Black Eyed Bird*, finished in the final rounds of judging for the Associated Writing Programs Book Award Series, and was a runner-up/finalist for the Beryl Markham Award in Creative Nonfiction. Her work has been anthologized, and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *The International Poetry Review*, *International Quarterly*, *The Literary Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *North American Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Onthebus*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *The Southern Poetry Review*, *The Sycamore Review*, *The Texas Review*, and *Under the Sun*, among others.

Tiffany Austin is currently studying poetry in Chicago State's M.F.A. program. Her work has appeared in their literary journal, *Warpland*, as a part of the Gwendolyn Brooks' Writers Conference.

Joe Babcock was born in Minneapolis, MN. In fifth grade he began writing fiction. His first novel, *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers*, was the 2003 Writer's Digest Self-Published book of the year, published through his imprint, Closet Case books. It is excerpted here. For interviews, reviews and photos visit him online at joebabcock.info.

Annabelle Baptista resides in Cambridge, MA. She holds a B.A. in English from New Mexico State University and is an avid spoken word artist and writer. She is also the winner of the Amazon Slam and is an active participant in local poetry slams.

Deanne Bayer's poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals including *Sulphur River Review*, *Small Pond*, *Potpourri*, *Plainsongs*, *NeoVictorian*. She lives in Ohio.

Dessie Bey is a poet and social/political activist. She is employed at the University of Pittsburgh as an administrator, where she is also an advisor to SOS (Save Our Sons and Daughters), a student organization. She is the Director of Azania Heritage International, an organization for trans-Atlantic linkages, a member on the Board of Directors of the Thomas Merton Center and the founder of MAAMS (Mothers of Afrikan Amerikan Males). She is also a member of the Kuntu Writers Workshop of Pittsburgh, PA. *Ashes to Ashes—360 Degrees of Poetry* is her forthcoming book.

Michele Bigley is currently enrolled in Antioch University's M.F.A. program. She lives in Oakland, CA.

Jacqueline Bishop was born and raised on the island of Jamaica in the West Indies, and has been living in New York City for several years. She holds a M.A. in English and a M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York University. Her prize-winning short stories and poems have been published in several magazines and literary journals, including *Callaloo*, *The Jamaica Observer Arts Magazine*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *MaComère*, *Renaissance Noire*, among others. She is the founding editor of *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* and teaches writing at New York University. She is also a writer in residence for Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

Joseph L. Bisz's writing has appeared in several journals including *Romanics Quarterly* and *Blueline*. He is the Managing Editor of the media and cultural studies journal *To the Quick*, and Associate Editor of *Harpur Palate*, the literary journal of Binghamton University, where he's currently finishing his Ph.D. in Creative Writing and English Literature.

Ethriam Cash Brammer holds a M.F.A. in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, where he was a winner of the prestigious *San Francisco Bay Guardian's* annual short fiction award in 1996. He has completed several literary translations for Arté Público Press including *Las aventuras de don Chipote o, Cuando los pericos mamen*, written by Daniel Venegas and originally published in 1924. In 2000, he was contracted by Gordon Productions to pen the screen adaptation of the Graciela Limón novel, *The Song of the Hummingbird*. His own work can be found in the Oxford University Press anthology, *Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States*. He's currently completing his short story collection, *Reclamación and other Short Fiction*.

Jeremiah W.E. Brennan was born in New York, although he has spent most of his life in the South. He returns to New York as often as possible to work on various film projects. His talents range from film to the culinary arts to poetry and short fiction. His writing style is as on-the-edge as possible, taking the reader into the recesses of the most disturbed of human minds, often premiering phrases and ideas in his work.

Camincha has a M.A. in Spanish Literature at San Francisco State University. Her poems and stories have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Tight*, *Northwest*, *Perceptions*, *Hard Love*, *Four by Four*, and *Kaleidoscope*. She is a member of PEN and is listed in *A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers*. She has desktop published several books including her most recent title, *Why Do I Think of Dead People at Poetry Readings?*

Nancy Caronia is a second generation Sicilian American on her father's side and a third generation Irish American on her mother's side. Her fiction and memoir has appeared in anthologies such as *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture* and *Don't Tell Mama! The Penguin Anthology of Italian American Writers*. Her narrative poem, "Mantras," was included in the Sicilian American/Canadian anthology, *Bitter Lemons*. She has practiced tai chi for over a dozen years and teaches at various locations in the Finger Lakes region. She is currently an adjunct professor at Finger Lakes Community College where she teaches composition and literature.

Lorie Caval, since the age of 13, has been involved in New York City's innovative nightlife scene—first as an avid party-goer, then as a nightclub columnist for *PAPER Magazine*, and eventually as producer of her own nightclub events, including the world-renown, Brooklyn-based deep house music weekly, *Bang the Party*. While building on a career as writer and editor for various magazines, books and websites, and as a party producer, Lorie spends much of her private time writing, studying djembe drums—and is also a self-taught visual artist, siting Frida Kahlo, Picasso, Salvador Dali and Diego Rivera as her greatest artistic influences. For the first time in 2001, Lorie put lyrics to music, penning the single "I Am the Road" (produced by Markus Enochen, performed by EMan and released on MAW Records in June 2002), piquing a new interest in songwriting. As a long-time writer of poetry, Lorie plans to start participating in shows and public readings in the near future. "Untitled" is her first published poem.

David Cherry spent most of the last year lying flat on his back, outside, staring into the fascinating blue created by the earth's heavenly breath in relationship to the universe, drawing head-driven conclusions, and arguing time. This story has little to do with it. His latest novella, *The Ridiculous Concept of Smiling*, is available through incrediblythin.com

Reba Connell is a Jewish lesbian poet, writer, and psychotherapist in Berkeley, California. She writes feminist and queer midrash and liturgy. Previous publications include *Sifrut: Literary and Arts Review*, *In the Company of Women*, and the upcoming *Lifecycles*, Volume 3. She recently made an audio CD, *Finding Peace in Stressful Times: Meditation and Self-Care Ideas for Busy People*.

Jeannette Drake, a writer of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, began a career in social work after graduation from Hampton University. She holds M.S.W. and M.F.A. degrees from Virginia Commonwealth University and presently works as

a psychotherapist incorporating poetry, music, visual art and creative writing as healing techniques. Her poetry has been published in *Honey Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*, *Callaloo*, *The Southern Review*, and other journals and magazines. She has received grants and fellowships from the Virginia Commission for the Arts, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation and a scholarship from the Leonard E.B. Andrews Foundation for her drawings. This is her first fiction publication.

Olga Economos holds an M.F.A. from Brooklyn College. Much of her work focuses on her experience as a Greek-American. She currently lives in Brooklyn.

Kelly Elayne was born and raised in Connecticut. She is currently immersed in the Los Angeles world of music video and commercial production. Her fiction has appeared in the literary magazines *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Lean Seed*, *Poetry Midwest*, *House Taken Over*, *Storyglossia* and the *Green Tricycle*.

Zetta Elliott, originally from Toronto, Canada, has been a permanent resident of the United States since 1994. She recently earned her Ph.D. in American Studies from New York University and currently teaches literature in the African-American Studies department at Ohio University.

Sybil Pittman Estess was born in Mississippi and lives in Houston, Texas. She has a Ph.D. in Modern Literature from Syracuse University, and has taught at many colleges in Houston. She is the author of a book of poems, *Seeing the Desert Green* (Lattitudes Press). She has co-edited *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (University of Michigan Press) and co-authored *In a Field of Words* (Prentice-Hall). She is a critic and poet, her poems having appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The New Republic*, *Manhattan Review*, and many other journals. For eight summers she taught in a seminary for secondary teachers on multicultural literature at the University of Houston. Her second book of poetry, "Perfect Blue," is currently circulating to publishers.

Maple Flagg is a native of Detroit and a performance poet. She has performed locally at Wayne State University, the Grand Café and Java Inc. Her poetry has been published in *Between the Lines*, *Harmony Park* and a Detroit Writers Guild anthology. She is a member of the International Woman's Writing Guild and the Detroit Writers Guild. She is an award-winning poet.

Peter W. Fong's work has appeared in many publications, including *The New York Times Sophisticated Traveler*, *Soundings East*, and *Tumblewords: Writers Reading the West* (University of Nevada Press). He has received a creative writing fellowship from the Montana Arts Council and in August 1994, was the Moran artist-in-residence in Yellowstone National Park. "Principles of Navigation" is an excerpt from his unpublished novel of the same name.

Anne Marie Fowler, the daughter of a Kentuckian father and a Spanish-Filipino mother, has earned an Associate of Applied Sciences with a concentration in photography from Bossier Parish Community College and a Bachelor of General Studies in Humanities from Louisiana Tech University. Her work has been published in *Savoie Faire*, *Absinthe Literary Review* and *Pearl*. She is also a Ruth Lily Poetry Fellowship nominee. She is currently completing the M.F.A. program at Spalding University and resides in a small village in Germany tucked between a buffalo farm on one side and a llama farm on the other.

Gilbert Gardiner is a Jamaican writer of African descent. He lives in Riverside, CA.

Jose Gonzalez has published poems in such places as *Colere*, *Calabash*, *Melting Trees Review*, and *Nantucket: An Anthology*. He has been a New England Association of Teachers of English Finalist for Poet of the Year. He currently teaches composition, creative writing and Latino and Latin American literature at the United States Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut.

Melissa Gonzalez was born and raised in Elizabeth, NJ, to a Colombian mother and Cuban father. She is an emerging writer living in Deltona, FL.

Robert E. Hayes is the following: male, black, former altar boy, former Marine, Vietnam vet, labor lawyer, diligent writer of stories.

W. J. Herring is a fiction writer based in Creekside, Pennsylvania. "Collision" is his first published work.

Michael Hoerman is of German, Irish and Cherokee descent. His poetry has recently been published in the following journals: *Freshwater*, *Big Muddy: A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley*; and anthologies: *Off the Cuffs* and *Mischief, Caprice and Other Poetic Strategies*.

Mark J. Hoy grew up in a small town east of Phoenix, AZ. He currently resides in Pittsburgh, PA. "Last Rites" is his first published poem.

Li Min Hua is the author of three volumes of poetry: *Lutibelle's Pew*, *Midnight Lessons*, and *Sunspots*. She's also edited special issues of *College English* and *Margins*. Over 1400 of her works have been published. From 1983 to 1987 she lived in exile in Asia. She currently teaches English at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

Ashaki Jackson is a Ph.D. candidate in Social Psychology. She has been featured on Poetry Television, KDVS 90.3 and has opened for Dr. Maya Angelou. She has previously been published in *The Griot*.

Bud Jennings holds an M.A. from the New York University Creative Writing Program. To pay the rent he teaches creative writing at Merrimack College and English at a high school north of Boston. His fiction has appeared in *Christopher Street*, *Between C&D*, and *Stuff*. He taught English for several years at a lycée in Paris, where he found inspiration for his novel-in-progress, *In and Out of Paris*, from where his excerpt originates. In August 2003, he eloped to Vermont.

Anthony Kellman was born in Barbados, West Indies. "A Final Battle" is a result of his poetic invention, "Tuk Verse." The rhythm of the poem is derived from various vocal and drum patterns of Barbados' indigenous folk music called Tuk. Currently, he lives in Atlanta, GA.

Stefan Kiesbye has received an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan. His work has appeared in *Carve Magazine*, *BowWow*, and *Linx Eye*. A collection of his stories won the *Flash!Point Fiction* Chapbook contest, and is due out in Spring 2004.

Tara Kolden's writing has appeared in several recent anthologies from Seal Press and Lonely Planet. "Off the Leash" is from an unpublished chapbook which mixes themes of wildlife and urban environments.

Kim Konopka received her education in United States, France, and Holland. She is an award-winning published poet and writer. In 2003, she traveled to numerous states to perform her work and most recently read in The Library of Congress. At the Santa Fe Borders she produces and emcees a monthly poetry series that features local and visiting poets from around the country. She holds a degree in Illustration and her fine art resides in several private collections.

Inez Lake was born and raised in Holland, but immigrated to the US in 1994 and became a US citizen two years ago. "Food for Thought" is based on the true story of the last few months of the German occupation in Holland, also known as the winter of hunger, since the north was cut off from food, electricity and fuel. She lives in Orinda, CA.

Susanne Wah Lee is an ABC (American-born Chinese). She has written on a variety of subjects including Chinatown gangs, interviews with Hong Kong directors, the Chinese student movement, and mehndi in Delhi for publications including the *Village Voice*, *Asia Week* (Hong Kong), and *Giant Robot*.

Jennifer Donice Lewis is a cum laude graduate of Howard University, and earned a law degree from the University of Miami (FL). She is a member of NAWW (National Association of Women Writers), SCBWI (Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators), and the Academy of American Poets. A former prosecutor, she is a past recipient of the Dade County Bar Association Pro Bono Award for Service, and a Guardian Ad Litem (volunteer legal advocate for abused and neglected children). Her work has appeared in *PopPoets*, *Penwood Review* and *Poetry Motel*.

Stephanie Li is currently a joint Ph.D./M.F.A. student at the Cornell English Department. She previously taught English at a public high school in California where she independently developed a class on American Writers of Color. She is also the daughter of a Mexican mother and a Chinese-American father.

Wayne A. Lindeman is just a contemplative white guy who grew up in a rural blue-collar family in upstate New York. He received his B.A. in Philosophy and Religion from Colgate University, moved to Boston (too expensive), moved to Albany, and liked it. He's there still. He is the recipient of a full merit scholarship from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College. "The City Builders" is the self-titled excerpt from his first novel.

Sara Littlecrow-Russell is Ojibway Metis and a single mother of two. She lives with her children in Boston, where she attends Northeastern Law School. Her award-winning poems have appeared in many journals, such as *American Indian Quarterly*, *US Latino Review* and *Meridians*. Her work has also appeared in a variety of anthologies, including *Sister Nations*, *Touched by Eros*, and *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* by Winona LaDuke.

Gabriela López (Sasparella) is a Mexicana artist/actor/writer born and raised in Norwalk, CA. She's part of the END-Dependence Spoken Word Tour. In 2001, she released her first self-produced poetry cd, "Sasparella: Words & Music" with the help of music producer Shug. She also co-owns (with Keith Tamashiro) a graphic design firm, Soap Design Co.

Flora Lutsky holds a M.F.A in Poetry from Brooklyn College/CUNY, a M.A. in TESOL from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and a B.A. from Barnard College/Columbia University, where she graduated cum laude. Her poetry has been published in *Columbia Review*, *Brooklyn Review* and *millers pond magazine*. She was an Honorable Mention for the Loella Cady Lamphier Prize for Poetry in 2000 and won the Editor's Choice Award from the National Library of Poetry in 1999. She currently lives on Long Island and teaches ESL in a junior high school.

Joanne M. Marinelli received her B.A. in English from Temple University. Between 1984 and 1985 she served as the Associate Editor of *The Widener Review*.

and since then she has appeared in over 80 small magazines, poetry most recently in *The Coc Review* and the e-zine's *Wicked Alice* and *Gin Bender*. Her chapbook, *Like Fire*, was published by Crawlspace Press. From 1992 to 1996 she worked as an advocate for persons with physical disabilities, and she still remains active in her local physical disabled community. In 2000, she served as a disability columnist for *HalfthePlanet.com* and *AccessLife.com*.

Adrian Matejka is a recent graduate of the Southern Illinois University M.F.A. program. He is a Cave Canem fellow and currently lives in Rochester, NY. His poems have recently appeared in *Clackamas*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Sou'wester*. His first collection of poems, *The Devil's Garden*, won the 2003 New York/New England Award from Alice James Press. "Genealogy of Insomnia" is from this collection.

Ken McManus' poetry has recently been published in *Off the Cuffs*, *Fresh Water Poems* and *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*. In 2001, he received a Pushcart Prize nomination for his poem, "keloid."

MEH is Matthew E. Henry, a first generation American, by way of Jamaica and Africa. He received dual degrees in English and Secondary Education (with a minor in Philosophy) from Eastern Nazarene College. He currently teaches English and Creative Writing courses at Middleboro High School in Massachusetts.

Rashaan Alexis Meneses graduated from UCLA with a B.A. in English, Creative Writing Specialization in 1998. In 2000, she was named a recipient of the UCLA Extension Writer's Program Community Access Scholarship. Her published work can be found in the 2002 FilAm Arts Chapbook and at poetsagainsthewar.org. She is also an active member of PAN Literary Arts/Spoken Word and a participant in the Wide Eyed Workshops, an Asian-American literary group based in Los Angeles.

Charlton Metcalf is a poet and songwriter from Minneapolis, MN. His most recent work has appeared in the *Unarmed Adventurous Poetry Journal*. He is a musician with the band Lavabloom (www.lavabloom.com), and a founder of the red dragon poetry group.

Rosie Molinary is a 2002 graduate of the M.F.A. program at Goddard College where she focused on non-fiction and poetic forms. She is currently the Director of the Community Service and the Bonner Scholars Programs Coordinator at Davidson College, where she graduated from in 1996 with a major in African-American studies and Urban Education Issues. She also designs and teaches creativity and creative writing workshops to help individuals develop their voices.

Daniel D. Molinoff has obtained a B.A. from Colgate University, a M.S. in journalism from UCLA, and a J.D. from Hofstra Law School. He's written numerous articles relating to divorce and custody in periodicals including *Newsday*, *Parade Magazine*, and a *New York Times Magazine* cover story on paternal custody. His poetry has been published in *Into the Teeth of the Wind*, UC, Santa Barbara's literary magazine. He lives in Larchmont, NY with his wife and three children and is a self-employed trial lawyer specializing in divorce.

William Monroe is professor of English and associate dean of The Honors College at the University of Houston. After graduating from the University of Texas, he worked as a news writer and editor before entering the doctoral program at the University of Chicago. His publications include articles on Willa Cather,

Flannery O'Connor, T. S. Eliot, and Vladimir Nabokov. He has also written *Primary Care*, a play dealing with end-of-life issues and Alzheimer's Disease. His research interests include medical humanities, alienation in literature and society, and contemporary fiction; he regularly teaches courses in Literature and Medicine, American Fiction, and the honors "great books" sequence, The Human Situation. Since 1994 he has directed The Common Ground Teachers Institute, a summer program focusing on multicultural literature. His recent book, *Power to Hurt: The Virtues of Alienation*, was nominated for the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Book Award. His current book project, *The Vocation of Affliction*, focuses on the life and work of Flannery O'Connor.

Farnoosh Moshiri was born in a literary family in Tehran, Iran. She received an M.A. in dramatic literature from the University of Iowa and an M.F.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Houston. She is the author of two novels, *At the Wall of the Almighty* and *The Bathhouse*. Her most recent book is collection of short stories, *The Crazy Dervish and the Pomegranate Tree*, while her third novel *The Drum-Tower* will be published in 2004. She is the recipient of several writing awards, including the Barthelme Award, from the University of Houston, Barbara Deming Award for peace and social justice, and the Black Heron Award for Social Fiction. She is currently an English faculty at Montgomery College and is working on her fifth book: a novel set in Houston.

Ngozi is a spoken word artist, actress and poet from Pittsburgh, PA. She is the proud mother of four active children who inspire her writing. Ngozi also loves to write and sing the blues. She is currently at work on her first novel and a spoken word CD.

Judith Nichols was born in Columbia, Missouri, grew up in Granville, Ohio, attended Earlham College and Pennsylvania State University. She teaches writing at Vassar College.

Yolanda Nieves is a Latina writer and teacher living in Chicago.

Dawn Karima Pettigrew holds a M.A. in Creative Writing from Ohio State University and B.A. in Social Studies (Popular Culture and the Media) from Harvard University. She is a correspondent for *Whispering Wind* and *News from Indian Country*. Her writing has also appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, including *Twenty Five and Under Fiction*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *Glimmer Train* and *Native Echo*. She is a member of Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, Native Writers' Circle of the Americas, and the Native American Journalists' Association. She is the author of the novel, *The Way We Make Sense*. "A Bed in Hell" is from *The Marriage of Saints*. She is currently a writer-in-residence at Western Carolina University.

Kenneth Pobo work has appeared online at *forpoetry.com*, *Three Candles*, *King Log*, *Adirondack Review*, *The Hornacle* and elsewhere. *Introductions*, his new poetry collection, was recently published by Pearl's Book 'Em Press (Atlanta, GA). He lives near Philadelphia.

Patricia Profitt is a 22-year-old, Southern-born, Irish-American punk. Born in Kentucky, she now resides in Chicago, IL.

Octavio Quintanilla hails from San Benito, TX, a small town in the Rio Grande Valley. She recently graduated from UT Pan American with a M.A. in Poetry.

Barbara Jane Reyes was born in Manila and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. She received a B.A. in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley and is a M.F.A.

candidate at San Francisco State University. Her poems have appeared in *Tinfish* and *Interlope* and several anthologies, including *Writing from the Filipino Diaspora*, *Going Home to a Landscape* and *Babaylan*. Her first book of poetry, *Gravities of Center*, was recently published by Arkipelago Books. She is currently working on a second book, a series of poems based upon the artwork of Filipino San Francisco artists, England Hidalgo (inspiration for "Wedding Sonnet" and "Wedding Sonnet 2") and Mel Vera Cruz.

Alicita Rodriguez was born and raised in Miami, in a community of exiles. She holds a B.A. in English from Florida International University and a M.F.A. in fiction from New York University. Her stories have been published in *American Writing*, *The Bilingual Review*, *The Hawaii Review* among other places. Currently, she is finishing her Ph.D. in fiction at the University of Denver.

Juan Armando Rojas-Joo is currently a visiting assistant professor at Amherst College through a fellowship of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. He recently won a grant to write a book of poems based on the people of the southwest desert and the Chinese immigrants who built the railroad tracks along the border between the U.S. and Mexico. He has published two books of his poetry, *Río vertebral* (2002), which included an introduction by critic and professor Julio Ortega of Brown University and *Lluvia de lunas* (1999).

Emma Rosenthal is an educator, artist, writer and human rights activist. She is the founder and Executive Director of the Writing Empowerment Project and Executive Producer and founder of Café Intifada! She has been a classroom teacher for over twenty years and holds teaching credentials in both California and Massachusetts. As a featured poet, she has performed at a variety of venues and programs such as Poetic License, Borders/Pasadena, Beyond Baroque, and Hyperpoets. She has one son and lives in Southern California.

Steve Russell is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, a high school dropout, a retired judge, and currently Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at Indiana University, Bloomington.

Ankush Sachdeva lives in a small Indian village in the state of Orissa. He has been writing poetry for over two and half years.

Ruth Irupé Sanabria was born in Argentina and raised in Mt. Pleasant, the Latino barrio of Washington, D.C. She is based in Perth Amboy, NJ.

Sarange is of American Indian (Tsalagi/Lakota), African American and Asian Indian (Hindu) descent, and embraces and honors all of her bloodlines equally and the same. She considers herself a Black Indian! She enjoys writing erotic, romantic and passionate poetry and short stories. "Primal Pleasures" is her first publication.

Kurt Schweigman a/k/a Luke Warm Water is an activist, poet and epidemiologist who was born and raised in Rapid City, South Dakota and is an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe. Across the United States, England and Germany, he has been a featured poet and participated in Poetry Slam venues. He has published two books, *Commods* and *John Wayne Shot Me*, and a CD. He wants you to know that he is a nice fellow to be around, as long as he is not carrying a tomahawk in his hands.

Eric Sisak is completing work on a second novel, *joy city*. "The Book of Spiral" is excerpted from his first novel of the same name. He can be reached through incrediblythin.com.

Amber A. Stewart was born and raised in Brooklyn. She is a writer and college student.

Lee A. Tonouchi is a 4th generation Okinawan-American living in Hawai'i. He's known as "Da Pidgin Guerrilla" because of his activism to get Hawai'i Creole English (also known as Pidgin to Hawai'i locals) more accepted as a legitimate language. In 2002, he received a Elliot Cades Award for Literature commemorating his entire output of work. He is also the recipient of a 2001 Ka Palapala Po'okela Award for his collection of Pidgin short stories, *Da Word*, from Bamboo Ridge Press. His short stories have been published in places like ZYZZYVA and *The Asian Pacific American Journal*. *Living Pidgin: Contemplations on Pidgin Culture*, his book of essays was published in 2002. He's currently working on a collection of Pidgin poetry.

Vincent Toro is a poet, playwright and musician who has performed his work in numerous readings and events, including at the Nuyorican Poets Café, the Bowery Poetry Club, the 2002 Wordstock Festival and the Harlem Theater Company. His writing has appeared in *Aquarian Arts Weekly* and *Newark Poetry Review*. In 2001, he was awarded a residency from the Atlantic Center for the Arts in Florida. He is a teaching artist for Teachers and Writers Collaborative and the Dreamyard Project and lives in Jersey City, NJ.

Rex Tyler grew up in a small, tightly-knit German-American community in the Middle West during the Great Depression and World War II, when many in such communities struggled with identity problems. He had a career in college teaching, during which time he wrote a couple of books and some journal articles in the field of politics. He is currently writing a book on international relations.

Martha Modena Vertreace-Doody is a National Endowment of the Arts Fellow. She is a Distinguished Professor of English and Poet-in-Residence at Kennedy-King College in Chicago, IL. She's been named the Glendora Review Poet (Lagos, Nigeria), a twice-awarded Fellow at the Hawthornden International Writers' Retreat in Scotland, and additional fellowships at the Writers Center in Dublin, Ireland and at St. Detinol's Library in Hawarden, Wales. She is the author of several books including *Second Mourning*, which won grants from the Scottish Arts Council. Her eleventh book, as yet untitled, will be published in 2004 by Diehard Publishers, Edinburgh. She lives in Chicago with her husband, Tim and her cats, Bon-Bon and Fred.

H.E. Wright is a self-described white dyke in "Mormanville."

Emanuel Xavier is a significant voice emerging from the neo-Nuyorican spoken word movement. His brand of art celebrates sexuality, Latino heritage and the often brutal streets of New York. He is the author of the Lambda Literary Award nominated semi-autobiographical novel, *Christ-Like*, and two poetry collections, *Pier Queen* and *Americano*. He has been featured on PBS's *In The Life* and HBO's *Def Poetry*. A recipient of the Marsha A. Gomez Cultural Heritage Award for his contributions to gay and Latino culture, he has also received a NYC Council Citation.

Murat Yazan was born in Adana, Turkey. Political unrest and social turmoil forced his family to immigrate to the States when he was two years old. He has studied at the prestigious Adana Anadolu Lycée in Adana, Turkey and holds a B.A. from the University of North Carolina in Asheville and a M.A. from Western Carolina University. He recently finished translating Ibrahim Budurlu's book

Kelogian Masallari, a collection of Kelogian Turkish folktales, and is working on a translation of 16th Century Ottoman poet, Fuzuli's "Leyla and Mejnun." He lives in Hendersonville, NC and teaches at Western Carolina University.

The following contributions were chosen from "Common Ground," an unpublished manuscript edited by Dr. Sybil Estess:

John Alexander	"Future Fag, 1"
Susan Atefat-Peckham	"Pahlavi Street"
Reba Connell	"desire"
Farnoosh Moshiri	"The Pool"
Judith Nichols	"The Day a Story Began"

Also from boice-Terrel Allen:

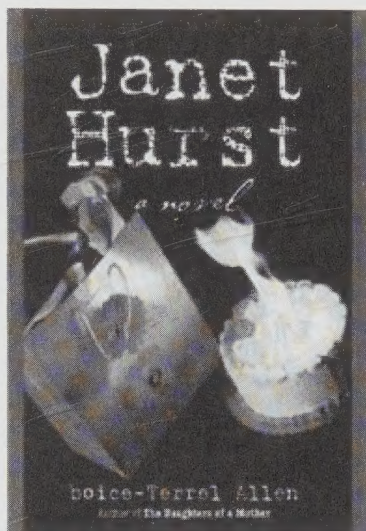
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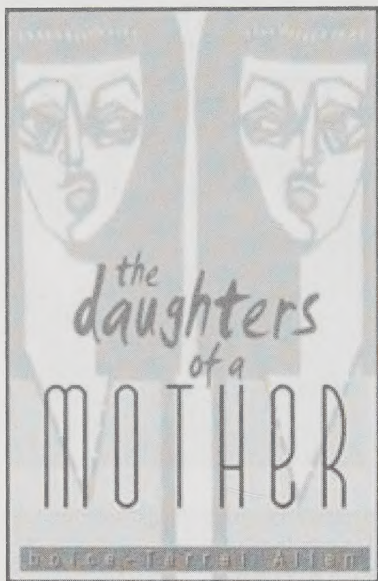
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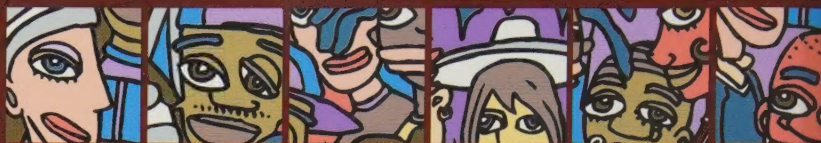
When twin sisters Talulah and Cora are uprooted from New York City to a Pittsburgh suburb, because of their father's new job, the sixteen-year-old girls are less than pleased. Eager for some excitement, Cora convinces her sister to break their mother's curfew and sneak out to Owl's, a popular college hang-out. The twins pretend they are college students and meet two young men who will alter the course of their young lives. *The Daughters of a Mother* is at once the study of family and its influence. It is the story of the bond between two sisters, but it is also an exploration of how having a strict mother who never wanted children taints every decision of her daughters.

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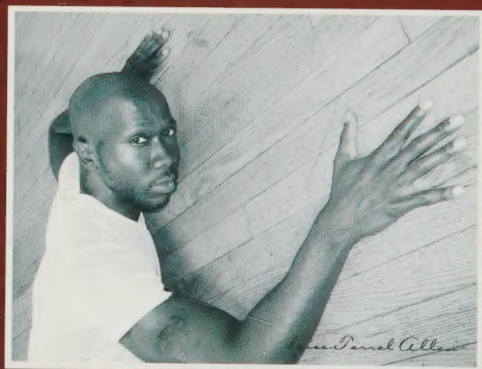
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boice-Terrel Allen is the author of the novels *Janet Hurst* and *The Daughters of a Mother*.

He holds degrees from both the University of Pittsburgh and New York University's Graduate School of Journalism. He's been the recipient of grants and scholarships from the Multicultural Arts Initiative, the Pittsburgh Foundation and the Archie D. and Bertha H. Walker Foundation. Currently, he's at work on a collection of short stories and a memoir.

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